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The sketches included in this entertaining volume deal with high personages and problems—some of celestial pre-eminence—from an unusual angle. Each presents a theme august enough to engage the serious attention of the philosopher or theologian, but handled in a dramatic form which, infused with humour and a penetrating irony, renders them no less attractive and stimulating to the general reader. Apart from the intrinsic interest of its contents, *Angels and Ministers of Grace* will appeal to those who appreciate a lucid and graceful literary style.

ANGELS AND MINISTERS OF GRACE

A SERIES OF CELESTIAL
DIVERSIONS

By
ADAM GOWANS WHYTE

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With the exception of *When the Devil was Ill . . .*, the accompanying sketches originally appeared in *The Rationalist Annual*, and are reprinted here by permission of the publishers of the *Annual*. The text of *The Bishop Receives a Visitation* has been expanded, but otherwise no changes have been made.

I

WHEN THE POPE WAS HAPPY

IN the Djarno valley—that fertile fold in the crystalline wastes of the Cordonite mountains—there still blooms the little flower known as Pope's Joy. Long years ago it was discovered by a peasant youth whose thoughts were upon his coming priesthood, but who had not yet begun to nourish visions of the triple crown that would one day adorn his brow. When he gazed upon the immaculate whiteness of the blossoms rising from the tender green of the leaves it seemed to him the veritable carpet on the threshold of Paradise. He raised his hand and blessed the flower, not in the manner of a mere priest, but with the authentic gesture of a Pope. From that moment the flower gained its miraculous power: if plucked by the pure in heart it would remain fresh until next Easter Day; if plucked by a sinner it would display on each petal a red stain like a nail-mark on a hand.

So runs the legend of Pope's Joy, as related in the fifteenth or sixteenth century or thereabouts by the pious monk Gamboglio. The monastery of which (doubtless) he was the bright particular star has disappeared; its very name is unknown. Nothing that Gamboglio wrote—if he ever wrote anything—survives. So that we have here a legend upon which the sceptic is unable to exercise his usual arts of suggesting that the documents were not composed by their reputed author, or that they were composite productions or forgeries or sheer inventions for the glory of God. The legend commands belief by its intrinsic beauty and the total absence of gross material evidence. For where, when all is said and done, lies the virtue of accepting a story for which proof, positive or plausible, is available? Faith born of a mere logical necessity—what a drab, what a mundane, what a jejune affair!

To the same illustrious and invisible Gamboglio we owe our intimate knowledge of the day on which the Pope was happy. He is, in fact, the only historian who has ever associated a Pope with happiness of the ordinary human sort. Popes have been represented as bellicose, launching crusades or holy wars with something like glee; or as enthusiastic, organizing inquisitions or persecutions from a sense of duty; or as ambitious, building up their temporal power to increase their spiritual efficiency; or—less frequently—as beatific through a sense of their abounding virtues. But as happy, as in the mood to chuckle and chortle like any common hod of humanity—well, one has only to look at the long, lugubrious procession of Papal countenances to appreciate what a miracle that would be.

Nevertheless it occurred to the Pope who was immortalized, if not created, by the veracious Gamboglio. Just as this Pope, while still in his novitiate, had cast a divine spell upon the flower in the valley of the Djarno, so circumstances (which were surely not of the Devil) wove a spell for the Pope in his old age. There were three circumstances in particular: first, he was seated in the Chapel of the Holy Childhood; second, his leading Cardinals were there at his command; and thirdly, Amoroso, the young preaching friar, had just ascended the pulpit.

The Chapel of the Holy Childhood was the Pope's own particular achievement. No one in the Vatican—not even the Papal Treasurer—knew where he had procured the money to pay the architect who designed it under his paternal eye, the masons who built it of chosen marble, and the artists who painted the wonderful series of frescoes ranging from the Annunciation through the Nativity and the Flight into Egypt to the confounding of the learned in the Temple, the labours of the Sacred Child at the carpenter's bench, and various scenes of boyish play and contemplation with which the Pope's imagination had enriched the meagre Gospel story. His Holiness had, so Gamboglio suggests, a

wonderful way with rich penitents who were afraid of the Final Audit; as the dispenser of God's infinite mercy he was able to send them away filled with confidence in their hereafter and relieved of those ill-gotten encumbrances which might have imperilled their immortal souls. If anyone had dared to ask the Pope how or why the Chapel had been built, he would have replied: "In order that many otherwise hopeless sinners might die peacefully." And he might have added: "In order to annoy my Cardinals, who secretly refer to it as the Papal Nursery."

The real reason, however, lay buried among the memories of his own youth.

As for the Cardinals, their solemn obeisances as he entered the Chapel and approached his throne filled him with a profound sardonic satisfaction. He knew that they bitterly resented his summons to hear a sermon delivered by this boy whose eloquence had so stirred the common people. He pictured them always as the Papal Vultures, hovering in spirit over the Vatican, waiting for him to stumble and fall so that they might at last dispute his carcass. Behind their suave inquiries regarding his health he read their thoughts; read them easily, since they were as his own had been when he himself had been a Cardinal. Their affection for him was of such intensity that not one of them would grudge him an early translation to the ineffable joys of heaven or would hesitate to assume the burden of his responsibilities as the Vice-Regent of God.

With a smile lurking on his benign lips the Pope speculated on which Vulture would be his successor. Possibly Sarchino, if only because the other Cardinals were so afraid of him that they would put him on the throne and unite against him. Sarchino had a devastating knowledge of Papal history, and in their councils he would, when it was a question of dealing with a nation of heretics or a prince who presumed to defy Holy Church, suggest measures so diabolical, so ruthlessly treacherous, that even a practised Inquisitor could hardly repress a shudder or prevent his hair

rising on his tonsured head like bulrushes round a pool. Then he would proceed to adduce precedents for the course he proposed, quoting chapter and verse from records in the Vatican library. All this was done with such solemnity, and indeed such unction, that his brother Cardinals wavered in their belief that he was the Devil come to shame them out of the mouths and deeds of former Popes and Cardinals. That he was a heretic they were all convinced, but none of them was anxious to start that particular hare with a Cardinal who, whatever his secret thoughts, never uttered anything that was not strictly canonical.

Then there was Casano, that lithe Florentine who, at fifty, had hair still raven black and an eye of compelling fire. Were the women of Rome to meet in conclave there would be no doubt of his election. Equally, were the men of Rome to make their choice there would be no doubt about his assassination. Next to him sat Fritelli, the greatest authority on ecclesiastical ceremony, millinery, and music that the Church had ever known; if he succeeded, there would be a rare crop of excommunications, anathemas, incarcerations, and burnings on details of ritual about which nobody but himself knew anything. In the background—as usual—lurked Hippolyto, who spent his days and nights intriguing against his brothers in Christ, confident that by destroying them he would save himself.

The rest of them were, the Pope reflected, a comparatively undistinguished crew—not given overmuch to plotting or to professions of piety, not dangerous enough or unscrupulous enough to be marked out for promotion. All that they could hope for was that, in a deadlock between rival parties, one of them might be chosen as an innocuous alternative. It was not for him, Pope though he was, to offer any suggestions to the Omniscient, but when he reviewed the history of the Holy See in the light of Sarchino's encyclopædic knowledge he felt that the policy of placing a harmless nonentity in supreme authority was not without its advantages.

Wondering, more or less idly, what would be the effect if he, as the Sovereign Pontiff, laid down this principle formally for the guidance of the Papal Vultures, his musings were interrupted by the arrival of Amoroso in the pulpit. This was the moment, as Gamboglio records, at which the Pope felt completely and ecstatically happy. The Cardinals, looking intently and superciliously at the young friar, did not notice the Pope grow pale with emotion; otherwise they might have feared, or hoped, that one of the fainting fits to which, by God's will, he had been lately subject was about to occur. Amoroso himself appeared to notice nothing and to be indifferent to the colossal piety and dignity of the congregation he was addressing. He spoke to them in an easy, amiable fashion, as if these sophisticated Cardinals in their robes were so many peasants, eager to have the way of salvation made clear to them.

For the first few sentences the Pope was almost unaware of the words; he was listening to the music of the voice. If he had ever asked himself why Amoroso had become a preacher who drew the people unto him, he would have found the explanation in the sensuous charm of the tones which gave new life to the old and repetition-worn phrases of piety. But it was memory, sweet and poignant, that Amoroso's mellow utterance awoke. The Pope became a youth again; a youth even as Amoroso, a youth standing watching the treading of the grapes; standing in silence, like the maid at his side, while the sun sank, leaving the earth still warm, and the stars came out one by one, burning as brightly and as purely as the fire within his heart.

Well, that was a long time ago, and God's mercy was infinite. God alone knew whether He desired His elect to pass unspotted through the world, or whether those He delegated for the pardoning of sins could perform their functions better or worse for having known the strange, exultant taste of sin. And God alone knew why the sin so well defined and so utterly condemned should offer so divine a sense of fulfilment

and retain its sweetness long after the bitterness of remorse and repentance had been forgotten. Stranger than the most recondite of the mysteries of the faith was the simple fact that he, the bearer of the apostolic succession, should rejoice with his whole being that a voice long dead lived again, and that a dear form lost in the dust under the crowded marbles in the valley of mourning had been resurrected in this radiant boy.

Tenderly his gaze dwelt upon the curves of brow, cheek, and lip, upon the ardent eyes, upon the hands with their quick, eloquent gestures. What he saw was a miracle so complete as to be an authentic token of divine pardon. Yet what Sarchino saw was a manifestation of a different sort. Looking under his eyelids, as a contemplative priest is accustomed to look, from the Pope to the preacher and from the preacher to the Pope, he traced similitudes to which the Pope was blind. A slow, sardonic smile touched the corners of his thin lips. Some day he must contribute to the Papal archives an explanation of the Pope's enthusiasm for the Chapel of the Holy Childhood and of the appearance in its pulpit of this humble friar.

Had the Pope read the thoughts of his most formidable Vulture, he too would have smiled, but not sardonically. He felt as serenely indifferent to Sarchino and all the other red-caps as Amoroso himself, and was relishing to the full the irony of the situation. For here were the most learned doctors of the Church, accustomed to wrangling for hours over the esoteric details of creed and ritual, obliged to listen to an almost childlike exposition of the principles of Christianity and of the ineffable perfections of Holy Church. The very text Amoroso had chosen, "Except ye become as little children . . .," was a masterpiece—unconscious, perhaps, since Amoroso's simplicity shone like the morning sun, but still a masterpiece. There sat these subtle-minded, sophisticated candidates for the Papal Throne, hearing themselves invited to believe as if they were barbarians who had never heard the name of Christ, urged to abandon the glittering treasures of the

world for the joy of being the humbled penitent on the fringe of heaven.

There they sat, motionless and attentive.

After this unique performance was over and the Pope had dismissed the congregation with a blessing bestowed in greater sincerity than usual, he dined alone and in the simple fashion he loved best. A delicious minestrone; fish cooked in the finest oil; cheese and wine from his native province: what more could even a Pope desire? The flagon was placed at his elbow when he retired to meditate in his favourite chair, with his feet resting on a silken cushion. For a time, while he sipped his wine and drowsed between the sips, his thoughts wandered over the past; then they turned to Amoroso's sermon. Every word of it, he was delighted to discover, remained with him; he could follow the argument step by step as it had been expounded in that softly resonant and entrancing voice. His Amoroso! Beatitude filled him, body and soul, and when the bottle was empty he folded his hands and closed his eyes, at peace with the universe.

Before he slept the angel deputed to watch over the apostolic slumbers heard him murmur, with infinite tenderness: "Wonderful! wonderful! There were moments when he almost made even me—yea, even me—believe!"

II

VOLTAIRE IN HEAVEN

How Voltaire contrived to get into Heaven is not known. Surmise, of course, has been busy over such a bizarre event, and in the absence of evidence of any kind the various schools of thought continue to dogmatize and dispute fiercely over the problem. One school is convinced that the whole affair was a fluke—that is to say, a fortuitous act of Divine intervention. Voltaire announced himself simply by his original name of François Marie Arouet, and the Celestial Civil Service, being very much like our own but even more restful and more detached from human affairs, confused him with a namesake, the sacristan of the church of St. Antoine in Auvergne. This other Arouet, having denied himself all earthly pleasures with admirable consistency throughout his life, found infinite compensation in the region for which M. de Voltaire was properly destined.

A second school is convinced that Voltaire slipped in unnoticed with a crowd of Lourdes pilgrims, who, having been disappointed over the power of the sacred spring to prolong their existence in the vale of tears, were being conducted, as a kind of excursion, through the pearly gate. In support of this explanation it is alleged that Voltaire, observing a manifest lack of enthusiasm on their countenances, drew an incorrect inference regarding their itinerary and thus found himself in Heaven through an error committed in good faith.

Among the admirers of Voltaire, however, a more acceptable solution is that he rallied St. Peter and the other keepers of the gate so pungently on their respective pasts that, in a scandalized panic, they hustled him through. Such a proceeding would certainly be consistent with his character, but to a scientific mind the

most probable explanation of the mystery is one which indicates that it was no mystery at all. Was not Voltaire the author of the famous phrase, "If God did not exist it would be necessary to invent him?" And was not this argument used so eagerly by the Church in its war against Atheism as to constitute (in spite of *écrasez l'infâme* and a few other unfortunate lapses) a valid passport to Paradise?

Amid these conflicting speculations we may rest upon the comfortable conviction that Voltaire really did enter Heaven. Anyone who doubts it need only bide his time; when he reaches the final home of all stiff-necked sceptics he will search in vain for the defender of Calas. Moreover, the following account of Voltaire's activities in Heaven is so plausible that it is bound to earn the description, so beloved of the Spiritualists, of being "evidential."

Voltaire had not been long in Heaven before he discovered that it did not fulfil any of the specifications drawn up by the authorities he had been educated (with some difficulty) to revere. A rapid tour of the various cerulean levels, from one to seven, was sufficient to convince him that his sword of reform need not rust in the New Jerusalem. Having completed his survey and prepared a memorandum which he regarded as equal to his best mundane productions in philosophical insight and felicity of expression, he sought an interview with the All Highest.

"Seigneur," he began, "I make bold . . ."

"You always did, my dear François Marie. And you always will. As your charming countryman Anatole France observed—or, I should say, will observe a few earthly generations hence—the expectation of becoming a new creature after death is altogether vain; each man remains the same man, worlds without end. So you, ere you have so much as found your celestial legs, are determined to put Heaven in order."

Voltaire gazed sideways over the glowing heights. For the first time in his existence he felt slightly disconcerted.

"At the risk of appearing presumptuous . . ." he ventured.

"In your case presumption is an act of homage. It betokens an active interest in fundamental questions—an interest which, in relation to the prevailing mental attitude, is rather refreshing. But let me anticipate you. What troubles you, *au fond*, is that Heaven is not what you thought it would be. Now tell me: who drew for your receptive soul the picture of Heaven?"

"Why, Siegneur, the Jesuits. . . ."

"And in that connection you believed them? In *that* connection, but in no other?"

"Well," urged Voltaire, "the Jesuits were in harmony with a numerous company of august authorities. There was a consensus of opinion among people of many creeds and races that Heaven was the reward ordained for the good, and Hell equally the reward ordained for the bad. Yet I find Heaven populated with Jesuits, Dominicans, Franciscans, Lutherans, Calvinists, Brahmins—all the popes, cardinals, priests, parsons, and pandits of all the multitudinous superstitions of a suffering earth. The very men I fought with a pen dipped in vitriol are those among whom I am destined to spend eternity!"

The All Highest smiled with infinite benignity. "Heaven the reward ordained for the good, and Hell equally the reward ordained for the bad! Oh, François Marie, did you really believe that? You, who knew so much better than most that all men are compounded of good and bad! Tell me, do you think that even I could separate my creatures into two categories—one worthy of infinite and eternal happiness and the other worthy of infinite and eternal woe?"

"Well," Voltaire replied, "I had some pricking doubts on the subject. . . ."

"Of course you had, and, with your acute vision of the darker frailties of the priestly mind, you were also aware that the organizations you classed as infamous gained immensely in power over the human mind by that simple dichotomy of sheep and goats. Nevertheless

the error, profound and deplorable though it might be, bore within it a grain of truth. The after-life *is* devised as a moral sequel, a compensation. And, what is more, it is planned on a dual basis as simple as the theological one, though vastly more rational."

"I stand amazed," said Voltaire impulsively. "The joys of Heaven are reserved for the men who invented Hell, while the pains of Hell are reserved for those who challenge that iniquity!"

"Patience! patience! Pause to observe how difficult it is for even an agile mind like yours to escape from its prepossessions. Call this place Heaven if you please, but do not confuse it with the Paradise of your Jesuit seminary. As for Hell, you have not yet had an opportunity of investigating its constitution."

"If this is Heaven, in any sense of the term, I think I should prefer . . ."

"Doubtless you would. But we may leave that issue in abeyance for the moment. If you think the matter over calmly and dispassionately, you will perceive that the one and only foundation of a peaceful existence on the astral plane lies in the separation of the ecclesiasticals from the non-ecclesiasticals. Such an arrangement has the merit of simplicity—I may even go so far as to say a Divine simplicity. On earth, which is a rather restricted theatre of operations, the two are mingled, and I need not expatiate to you upon the miseries arising from the inveterate tendency of the ecclesiasticals to regard themselves as heaven-sent dictators and to harry and persecute the non-ecclesiasticals. In the upper regions, however, it becomes feasible to segregate the ecclesiasticals and allow those they describe as ungodly, unregenerate, lost, and damned, to pursue their own ways in peace."

"Seigneur," observed Voltaire, "you have opened up for me an attractive vista of speculation. I begin to understand. . . ."

"I am sure you do, and also to hesitate in your ardour of reform. You have already noted, in your interesting memorandum, that the inhabitants of Heaven divide

their time between extolling their own creeds and devotions and abusing the creeds and devotions of others. 'An infinite and devastating futility,' I think you described this mode of existence. But what else, I ask you, is feasible, or just, or merciful, in the case of such people? I have no desire to persecute my creatures, however misguided you or I may consider them to be. Their ceremonies, in face of the infinity surrounding them, are meaningless, yet they give the performers immense pleasure. Their abuse and derision of other ceremonies also gives them immense pleasure and does nobody that matters any harm, since the rancorous quarrelling is, as it were, within the family."

"But surely," protested Voltaire, "it leads nowhere?"

"Of course it leads nowhere. Think how grieved all these ardent ecclesiastics would be if it led anywhere. They ask for nothing better than to go on for ever and ever expounding and denouncing without making any progress whatsoever. Were they to succeed in converting each other the confusion would be unimaginable, even to me. Occasionally, it is true, a member of one flock drifts to another and is welcomed with demonstrations which make the very vault of Heaven resound. But for the most part the mutual oppositions remain coherent. Yes, M. de Voltaire, what appears to you as a chaos of *odium theologicum* is a perfectly organized and stable system—a synthesis of implacable opposites. What revolts you as a senseless futility is a source of endless satisfaction to pious thousands. To them at any rate this is Heaven. Moreover, these ecclesiastics are not altogether the dull, contemptible negation you have so often alleged. They are remarkable people, ingenious, tenacious, teeming with metaphysical subtleties beyond all comprehension, human or divine. We owe to them the doctrine of my triune nature—a doctrine which must possess some significance in their eyes, since they have slain or ostracized their fellow men in its honour. At odd times I contemplate it in the envious yet appreciative mood of a creator con-

fronted with a creation which would never have occurred to him. They describe it, quite properly, as a mystery, and are never tired of expounding it to their fellows; but when I incite them to dilate upon it with myself they are seized with a curious diffidence and politely but erroneously suggest that the mystery is no mystery to me. Men who generate such fantasies are surely entitled to glorify them and enjoy them for ever. I graciously permit them to do so, and consequently their eternal home is very Heaven."

Voltaire brooded on this revelation of Heaven until his curiosity was piqued about the constitution of Heaven's opposite.

"If I may be permitted to descend," he suggested, "I should like . . ."

"Not yet awhile, if you please. I find you more entertaining, more stimulating, in this environment. In due course you will discover that Hell is likewise a happy institution, though devoid of what you would describe as the rival infamies which constitute the peculiar joy of Heaven. Hell, as I have already indicated, is peopled with non-ecclesiastics. The preliminary sifting is fairly rigorous; we do not, as the orthodox legends suggested, merely bundle into Hell all those who are not provided with a clerical passport. Any newcomer suspected of pious leanings or spiritual prepossessions is interned in Heaven, at least until continuous contact with ecclesiastics has effected a cure. Moreover, should an inhabitant of Hell display any sign of dogmatism, sacerdotalism, credulity, intuitionism, or obscurantism, he is politely warned of the risk of transfer; and, I need hardly assure you, the warning is generally effective. The result is that you have a community engaged in the free cultivation of the arts and sciences. Briefly, they pursue the ever-expanding reality of objective truth, while in Heaven my children worship the chimera of subjective truth. Mutual toleration is to Hell what mutual contention is to Heaven. In Heaven anything is believed; in Hell all is doubted."

"Even the existence of the Deity? I confess I should vastly like to witness the arrival of an Atheist into your very presence!"

"You will have ample opportunity. It happens every other moment, I might say, and it causes no embarrassment, except in the case of sceptics who have held high positions in the Church. The customary observation made by the Atheist is that he found Theism incompatible with a world in which the clergy—domineering, dogmatizing, and persecuting—flourished as the exponents of the doctrine."

"So far I am inclined to agree with them," responded Voltaire. "And therein lies the essence of the protest I had penned for your august consideration. I believe in freedom and toleration—more intensely, I vow, than anybody in Hell itself—but I find it hard to stomach your Divine toleration of the barbaric conceptions of your own Being and Attributes I hear extolled from a million celestial pulpits. With rare exceptions those who speak in your ineffable name are mentally still sunk in the mire of the Dark Ages. What follies, what gross and repulsive superstitions, what hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness, have I not heard, here in Heaven itself, from the lips of the Lord's anointed!"

"Well spoken, O scourge of prelates! So you would have me deal with them, trounce them, silence them?"

"Instantly and ruthlessly, even as the Lord of Hosts smote the followers of false gods!"

"Not so well spoken. Indeed, I seem to hear an echo of the clerical voices you condemn. Let that flash of persecuting fire fade out, my dear François Marie, and reflect, with your customary ironic understanding, upon the situation. There they are, my clamorous clerics, unchanged and unchangeable—even by me. Were I to silence them they would merely become rebellious and profoundly unhappy. And for what purpose? Their clamour harms nobody, since they declaim only to their own spiritual kindred, already and for ever beyond redemption. Remember, please,

that they are all, clergy and congregations alike, convinced that they are in Heaven."

"Not all," protested Voltaire. "I have met at least one mournful being in this strange parody of Paradise, Donna Christina . . ."

"Ah! You see how just was the observation of Anatole!"

"Donna Christina," pursued Voltaire, with a polite gesture of deprecation, "is a lady of high lineage and exemplary piety. A model Christian in every detail. Her eyes, if you will permit me to become lyrical, are like deep pools of experience reflecting the innocence of Heaven itself. Her . . ."

"Yet for all that, and your passionate admiration, she is mournful?"

"Yes, and on account of nothing but one of the most fatuous of superstitions. Her deceased husband, it appears, died without being fortified with the rites of Holy Church and without being buried in consecrated ground. Indeed, he was not, from all accounts, buried at all in the orthodox sense of the term. During a voyage in a remote and savage region in the South Seas he was captured, cooked, and consumed by cannibals. Death, for him, led to a form of communal reincarnation on the heathen level. So Donna Christina is left not only lamenting his end but deploring his complete loss of status in the hierarchy of souls."

"A sad story!" observed the All Highest, with a smile. "But what would you have me do?"

"Why, eradicate from Donna Christina's mind the priestly obsession that darkens her whole existence. If that be impossible, perform the acts of absolution and consecration by your own supreme authority. Seigneur, were you to witness her grief . . .!"

"Impulsive as ever! So you would deprive a beautiful woman of an abiding and illimitable source of joy?"

"I? On the contrary!"

"Thus reasons the blind heart of man! Have you so soon forgotten that nothing makes a woman happier

than the possession of a perpetual grievance, especially one which awakens the compassion of the chivalrous male? Let us leave Donna Christina undisturbed in the beatitude of her attractive tears. Her late husband, I may inform you, made his voyage for reasons which in all ages have seemed good to husbands attached to ladies of exemplary piety, and he is now comfortable in Hell, immune from all desire to seek reunion with the lady whose eyes present to yours such a poetic blend of experience and innocence. She would hate to lose the conviction that his soul is wandering disconsolate in limbo, since, apart from the value of the emotional asset, she feels in her secret heart that the rascal richly deserved such a fate. As for intervening in the ceremony of absolution or consecration . . .”

The All Highest appeared to meditate, and Voltaire waited in mingled impatience and patience until he resumed.

“As a student of English literature, M. de Voltaire, you will be acquainted with the poem in which John Milton described an imaginary battle in these realms. The conflict, you will agree, was sufficiently sanguinary, rivalling the most holy of religious wars. Yet the Miltonian Campaign, as I may call it, would be a mere skirmish compared with what would happen if all Heaven were to unite in revolt. One thing, and one thing only, could effect that dread coalescence. Were I to interfere with the least of the professional prerogatives of the priesthood, Heaven would be transformed instantly into a totalitarian State, united for aggression. And I am fain to confess that the prospect inspires me, even me, with an uncomfortable measure of awe and terror.”

“I begin to perceive,” said Voltaire, “that my criticism of your policy may have been somewhat hasty and ill-considered. Nevertheless . . .”

“Nevertheless, being M. de Voltaire you are determined to go on criticizing. Nevertheless, again, I must exercise my prerogative of omnipotence on this occasion and insist upon an interval for cool ratiocination. Take

as long as you please—a year, a century, a bunch of æons; time is not rationed. Here is an official pass for the nether regions, where you will be warmly received by the Prince of Darkness and the heretical hierarchy. They will welcome you, I am sure, as a valuable acquisition. Farewell!”

“Courtesy and curiosity,” said Voltaire, “both compel me to obey your commands. Nevertheless . . . *au revoir!*”

In due course Voltaire returned and sought audience of the All Highest.

“As a holiday resort,” he reported, “Hell has unlimited attractions. I have been assured, and not without sincere gratification, that the gates will always be open to me. I find, however, that a region filled with intelligent and free people palls upon me.”

“I feared as much.”

“But think, Seigneur! Not an infamy, not a shade of tyranny, not even a glint of the less insane follies of mankind! Figure to yourself how bored I became, and with what joy I return to this world, where the pestilence of priesthood gives a zest to existence. Heaven, Seigneur, is my home, for Heaven cries out for a missionary.”

“On any other enterprise I should say ‘God be with you.’ But in this affair . . .”

“Seigneur, while Heaven exists I cannot stand idle. I do not possess your infinite patience.”

“Yet you will need it.”

“Doubtless I shall desire, as the æons roll on, to borrow occasionally from your store, but I comfort myself with the thought that I have all eternity before me. What a heavenly prospect—to fight the everlasting enemy *in sæcula sæculorum!*”

III

THE BISHOP RECEIVES A VISITATION

THE Bishop took a frank, exuberant pride in the efficiency with which he conducted the affairs of his diocese. Less exalted brethren, perceiving within themselves many qualities more appropriate to episcopal rank, argued that such skill in mundane administration connoted a lack of spirituality. If they dared—and some of them did dare, but never more than once—to hint as much in sardonic asides to conversations off the record or in the self-conferred capacity of candid friend, they drew upon themselves a mass bombardment. The attack opened with the shattering paradox that spirituality and business efficiency were essentially one, and it was supported by all the big guns of Christendom. Consider St. Paul, the virtual founder of the Christian Church—was he not an ardent mystic and a supremely competent business organizer, worthy to be regarded as the patron saint of advertising agents and efficiency experts? After St. Paul came a procession of varying distinction but uniform cogency: Catherine of Genoa, with her hospital and asylum; Mme. Guyon, who had a triumphant career as the popularizer of Quietism in the face of Papal opposition and persecution; St. Teresa, who established thirty-two convents and managed them with a truly divine ability; Ignatius Loyola, the general of a sanctified army so numerous and so well disciplined that Popes envied and feared its power. With an almost malicious glee the Bishop would expatiate on the example of Grey Eminence, that master of the technique of communion with God; where else but from this spiritual source did he draw the inspiration for enterprises so daring, so far transcending even the cynical diplomacy of his more worldly master, that Red Eminence stood amazed if not appalled?

“Peradventure,” he would proceed, “you find some of these illustrations of my argument a trifle lurid. They are mainly drawn, as you will observe, from the Roman Church, in which the dramatic element is apt to be transpontine. We, on our side, are more suspicious of spiritual endowments; we demand, from motives of timidity and worldly convention, that they should be decorous and restrained. Had we ourselves been more spiritual, we would not have cast out John Wesley, and so precipitated a schism which depleted our forces and our funds and from which only Satan and his cohorts of infidels have derived any satisfaction. Wesleyanism became a religious power not because of its doctrines, not even because of Charles’s comforting and hortatory hymns, but because John combined spiritual fervour with the capacity for getting things done—as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be. And if you feel that Methodism is still a somewhat vulgar witness, let me invite you to contemplate the highly respected community of Quakers. A Quaker may be defined as a man who waits for God to speak to him before he ventures to speak of God. This is a form of Christian humility which, I make bold to suggest, is not cultivated with sufficient assiduity in the composition of our sermons and our prayers. However, the feature I desire to bring into focus is that the terms ‘prominent Quaker’ and ‘leading business man’ are virtually synonymous. How, then, can you base a charge of spiritual apathy on the possession of a gift for organization and administration?”

Having thus equated Mysticism and Management to his own satisfaction, the Bishop would, if his hearer’s patience had not been strained beyond Christian limits, expound one of the foibles of his daily procedure. During the morning sessions with his secretary all awkward letters were set aside in a tray formally labelled “For consideration” but described by the Bishop in his playful moments as “evil communications.” Routine business was thus expedited, and hasty judgments which might corrupt good manners

were avoided. If the problems in suspense came to mind when he was presiding at a conference, or opening a Church bazaar, or addressing a Mothers' Meeting, he dropped them quietly but firmly into the Unconscious, there to simmer in Freudian darkness. The time appointed for consideration—or, rather, action—was the hour of eight. Invariably, by the grace of God, he found his decision ready for dictation to his secretary; thanks to the type of dinner achieved by his dear wife (whom God bless and protect) and to the sovereign alchemy about which Omar Khayyam had hymned so melodiously, the decision was sure to be one in which his pre-prandial impulse to smite the sinner, and smite him hard, was restrained by the mellow wisdom engendered by peace within.

What the secretary thought of this arrangement was fully known to the victim alone. He had described to his wife the solitary occasion upon which he had dared to mention the subject of remuneration for overtime to the Bishop and had been informed, with the gay and sympathetic smile which made the Bishop so popular, that, "in the divine lexicon of duty there is no such word as overtime." Being a respectful communicant, aware of his worm-like insignificance in relation to his consecrated employer, his account of this futile revolt had been so subdued that his wife treated lightly, indeed frivolously, his exploration of the conditions under which the painful extinction of a Bishop might be dismissed as justifiable homicide. So he bowed politely to the Bishop at eight o'clock evening after evening, and bowed again on his dismissal at nine, or nine-thirty, evening after evening, in a manner which the Bishop, who was sensitive about the deportment of those privileged to assist him, considered beyond reproach.

On the evening of the Visitation the Bishop had three crumpled rose leaves to remove from the diocesan couch: a curate who had embraced Communism; another who appeared to be on the point of embracing, or being embraced by, most of the young ladies in the parish, and a vicar who was scandalizing the evangelical

members of his congregation with practices designed to demonstrate that the Protestant Reformation had either never happened or was a colossal blunder that should be completely forgotten. The third case was the simplest of all, and the Bishop polished it off in periods of Johnsonian sonority which committed him to nothing in particular but carried overtones audible to a sensitive ear. These High Church fellows were able, scholarly, and ambitious. Above all, ambitious. Of late years they had been astute enough to keep within the permitted bounds—wide enough, God knew!—and to restrict their ardours in the matter of millinery, candles, and aumbries to whispered conversations with ladies who shared their regret at the inadvisability of going, as it were, the whole hog. It would be enough, in this particular case, to send the rebellious vicar a sort of casual pastoral communication, rambling over Church affairs in general, touching lightly on pending changes which would create vacancies in certain not-undesirable niches, and dwelling upon the embarrassment of Bishops who had so many competent and loyal and discreet servants from whom to make their selection.

The amorous curate was, of course, beyond the reach of hints, either plain or diplomatically veiled. Pursued by Numbers, he must seek refuge in Exodus. Nothing would have given the Bishop—as a man, not an ecclesiastical institution—more pleasure than to settle the curate's trouble with medieval ferocity; curates, however, were scarce, and he was bound to admit that the Church had erred in giving a young man of film-star aspect his first charge in a town inhabited mainly by female factory workers. Even a saint could hardly be expected. . . . However, the case was one for swift and drastic action, not for charitable extenuation. A curate would shortly be required for a delectable district famed for its orthodox mothers and disciplined daughters, all of appropriate social position and familiar with the arguments against clerical celibacy. Within six months of the transfer the curate would receive a sacramental life-sentence, and if he ever

ventured to stroll again through the Gardens of Aphrodite a lead would be provided.

The case of the Communist was a trifle more delicate. Nobody was more eloquent than the Bishop himself in declaring that the Church had no concern with the political complexion of its clergy. By a happy dispensation of Providence most of them were of the same cerulean hue, but the inclusion of Liberals and Socialists, however deplorable, remained permissible. And of Communists likewise, God help us! If a clergyman chose to exalt Karl Marx to a high place in the Christian pantheon, there was apparently nothing that the episcopal body could do about it except groan in spirit. Which it did, and all the more deeply because Communists in general flaunted their Atheism one minute and claimed in the next that Christ was the first great Communist. But the Bishop, while he groaned as loudly as anybody on the sacred bench, had an acute and comforting sense of the difference between "apparently nothing" and "absolutely nothing." Direct action on the score of the blasphemous and heretical implications of Communism was out of the question; either it would fail (for who nowadays could define heresy?) or it would transform an unknown curate into a popular martyr—quite the worst kind of advertisement in these sceptical and rebellious times. On the other hand, indirect action . . .? Ah, well, no man was perfect, and young men with extreme convictions were peculiarly liable to indiscretions which, if they were not evil, failed to avoid the appearance of evil.

While the Bishop pondered these things, the secretary let his thoughts dwell upon the imminent prospect of supper and bed, knowing well that no letter, not so much as a confidential memorandum, would record the Bishop's plan of campaign. There would be, on some obviously casual occasion, a quiet talk with a desperate vicar, praying to be delivered; in due course there would be disciplinary action, about the details of which no decent person would dream of inquiring, and so peace would once more spread its blessings undisturbed.

With the departure of his secretary, the Bishop settled down for the most enjoyable hour of the twenty-four. It was a sacred hour, during which he was not to be disturbed save for the most urgent business. Since his dear wife and his devoted butler Farquharson were the joint and several judges of what constituted urgency, intrusions were rare. The guardians of his solitude were agreed jointly—if not severally—that the hour was spent in meditation and prayer. Farquharson's manner, indeed, when he placed the decanter of port at the Bishop's elbow and retired, was that of an acolyte leaving a distinguished penitent alone with God.

Sipping the wine, which was a noble tawny which Farquharson had decanted at the instant of apotheosis, the Bishop reflected gratefully on his possession of a cellar and a butler worthy of each other—and perhaps also of himself. Surveying the history of the Church of England, the discerning eye became aware of a long succession of venerable figures distinguished as brightly for their discriminating knowledge of vintages as for their appreciation of the subtler points of theology. The persistent association of these two manifestations of the critical faculty was surely not accidental. Apart from the broad principle—which, of course, he accepted without question—that all things were an expression of the will of God, one had to admit the significant phenomenon that the Evangelicals, whose position as gentlemen and Christians remained in dispute, had no respect for the Anglican tradition and no soul above nourishing stout and mineral waters. There might well be a grain of golden truth in the observation, made by his wine merchant at the conclusion of a particularly choice bottle, that a good cellar is the Church's one foundation.

Musing on these gracious mysteries the Bishop stretched his feet towards the fire, and so became conscious, not for the first time in his periods of reverie, of his legs. They were shapely legs, and had played no small part in his progress towards the

Anglican mountain-tops. More than once his old friend Chandler, now a Professor of Genetics, had assured him that their perfection of form had restored a waning faith in Design in Nature. "These limbs," he had declared, "so admirably adapted to their spiritual purpose, are the culminating product of a predestined concatenation of genes extending over countless generations. Ever since the Age of Reptiles the division and union of selected chromosomes has been controlled so that, in this year of grace, you should stand upon a platform with a form which fills the female bosom with adoration and the male bosom with respectful envy. In pursuance of the same great Design the ordeal by garter was imposed upon the Anglican hierarchy. Deans and what-not with spindle-shanks, knock knees, bandy legs, or gross knobbly calves, are denied the opportunity of concealing their deficiencies within trousers; they must stand before the world as God made them, embellished only by the pious skill of the clerical tailor. Herein we find clear evidence of divine selection. Since the spawning of life in primeval slime you, my exalted friend, were destined to become an Archbishop."

Archbishop! The word, by certain standards, was not euphonious, but for the Bishop it had its own subtle music. He let its echoes wander round the inner courts of his being where ambition lived in strict seclusion. An alluring prospect—and not beyond the range of practical politics! With all respect to Chandler's fantasy, he need not trust to his legs alone to carry him to the ultimate height. There were certain measures . . .

Suddenly he became aware that the armchair at the other angle of the fire, the chair reserved for distinguished visitors, was occupied. A young man sat there in a posture suggesting that he had just alighted and might at any moment take flight again. Without disrespect—at least for the truth—it must be admitted that the Bishop goggled at the intruder. For his lordship, who credited miracles only in the past tense,

was faced with a choice between two incredibilities. Either Farquharson had entered, informed him of an arrival which merited attention, received permission, and announced the visitor in his customary vesper-bell voice without the Bishop being conscious of any one of these events—either that, or the youth had evaded the Palace guards and gate-crashed into the holy of holies at the holiest hour. The latter hypothesis might be less fantastic than the former, but it was discounted by the ineffable ease of the visitor, who clearly felt himself very much at home.

“Good evening, my lord!”

The Bishop did not return the smile. “I fear . . .,” he began.

“Ah, surely you have not forgotten me?”

This question silenced the Bishop for a moment. Had he, or had he not? There was something disturbingly familiar about this young man—something associated, absurdly enough, with blazers and sculls and photographs of brawny groups in oak frames. But the link eluded him. Was his memory, hitherto royal in its range and tenacity, beginning to fail him? If so, he might as well give up hope of becoming. . . .

“I fear I have,” he snapped. “Pray be good enough——”

“What a pity!” the young man interjected. “But it is the tragic fate of youth to be forgotten by age.”

“That,” said the Bishop testily, “is the kind of facile aphorism in which at your age I used to indulge. I have long abandoned the habit, which ministered more to personal vanity than to intellectual growth.”

“Again, what a pity! Shaping aphorisms is surely an innocent and graceful art, akin to the carving of cherry stones. You must forgive me if I still display the weaknesses that marked your youth, before the long grey years taught you the wisdom of repression.”

The long grey years indeed! Was this youngster attempting to pull the episcopal leg? Whether or not, the time had come to put this preposterous interview on a normal footing.

"You have doubtless come to consult me," he said in his most efficient voice.

"I have come, my lord, to take counsel with you."

That, reflected the Bishop, was the same thing, yet not quite the same thing. It contained a hint of reciprocity which was *prima facie* outrageous. So he tried another familiar opening gambit.

"Doubtless you are contemplating ordination?"

"You see me, my lord, standing hesitating on the threshold of the Church, just as you yourself stood thirty-odd years ago."

At last they had reached common ground—and old familiar ground of doubts and difficulties and mental reservations and the squeamishness of young stomachs faced with the gargantuan feast of the Thirty-nine Articles. The Bishop launched himself and sailed away gaily until the young man stopped him with a peremptory gesture and the remark: "We can safely leave all that to Old Butler."

"Old Butler?" gasped the Bishop. "Old Butler has been dead for years."

"Very probably," was the cool reply, "but the Church of England is never without an Old Butler. And if I may be permitted to indulge in a form of humour which you have, I can well imagine, abandoned along with the cult of the aphorism, let me say that his function is essentially that of an old butler. He selects the appropriate articles, arranges them in the most attractive fashion, and presents them with an air of mingled authority and obsequiousness, precisely as Farquharson arranges your table linen, your menus, and your wines according to the social status and personal idiosyncracies of your guests. Indeed, Farquharson's task is much more arduous, since he deals with concrete things and must observe a definite standard of values. I surmise—not without a certain degree of confidence—that he would hesitate to offer your most reverend friend the Archbishop a symbolical version of a glass of sherry, accompanied by the assurance that His Grace

would find it as potent and as dry as the veritable grape served on his former visit, when he had absorbed a second and a third before dinner. Nevertheless the spiritual Farquharsons do that sort of thing every day to the fledglings of the faith. And get away with it. But who cares? Who cares what even a Bishop believes or says he believes? The meaning of words is the meaning one chooses to attach to words. That, my lord, is another aphorism. Feeble it may be, but it has been a source of comfort to Old Butlers from time immemorial."

"No, no!" he went on hurriedly, before the Bishop could decide which of these crazy thrusts to counter first, "it is not adolescent doubt that daunts me. Considering that my expensive education has left me almost completely ignorant of the history and constitution of the universe, of man, and of human thought, I imagine there is a sporting chance that somewhere under the Anglican umbrella—that is to say, between pseudo-Romanism and near-Unitarianism—I shall find a tolerable creed. My difficulty is an obsession which, my lord, may well have haunted you at the same critical stage in your life. Have you forgotten it too? Did you never pray to God to protect you from becoming a typical parson?"

The Bishop gazed at him sombrely, wondering how this impudent stripling contrived to conjure up phantoms that sent cold, eerie feelings flickering up and down his spine. "And what," he asked with an air of benevolent condescension, "does modern youth find so terrible in the typical parson?"

"Precisely the same things as the youth of thirty-odd years ago found, my lord. No one knows that better than yourself. If they did not know typical parsons in the flesh, they could find them, stripped naked and spiritually transparent, in the pages of Trollope. Curious, is it not, my lord? Trollope is universally regarded as a safe writer for Christian households; in his little worlds, each of which revolves round a church spire, everyone is a Christian of sorts. Yet what

sceptic bent on destroying the Christian illusion could paint a more deadly picture than Trollope does of those—you remember his words, my lord—‘those comfortable prebendaries, those gentlemanlike clerical doctors, those happy, well-used, well-fed minor canons’? His Grantlys and Proudies and Slopes: what do they all live for, good and bad alike? For preferment and position and power; for wealth and well-stocked cellars; for all that the world has to give to the worldly. They spend their days plotting and counter-plotting, in laying traps for their enemies, in assiduous wire-pulling, in planning intrigues which for subtlety and contempt of scruple exceed those of Grey Eminence at his worst. Trollope records the performance in detail and in the most matter-of-fact language, with hardly the faintest suggestion of its painful significance. When he makes a comment at all, it is merely the mildest of deprecations, as when he remarks that Slope and the Archdeacon, who hated each other like hell, were both eager, much too eager, to support and increase the power of their order. Here and there a clerical figure with the rudiments of decency is allowed to appear, but he is mentally a nonentity, wanders like a lamb in a world of wolves, and is saved from destruction only because the pack on whose side he happens to be is more feral than the other. The Dominant Christian is the one whose soul is centred on the main chance, and who pushes and shoves and trips and dodges until he emerges into gaitered glory as a Dean, a Bishop, or an Archbishop.”

The Bishop permitted himself a laugh—a heartier laugh than his dignity had sanctioned for thirty-odd years. It served to alleviate the chilly discomfort induced by this extraordinary young man who uttered sentiments so disconcerting—and so disconcertingly familiar. It also brought a fearful temptation to express his regret that so earnest a pilgrim should be diverted—save perhaps momentarily—by a Trollope. But no; that sort of thing would never do with anybody below the rank of a Minor Canon. He must content himself

with the less pungent statement that Trollope, after all, was but a single witness.

"True," responded the visitor, "but honest, competent, and friendly. Like yourself, shall we say? And do you, I wonder, corroborate or dispute his evidence? You have lived among these men, my lord; worked with them, joked with them, bullied them, sympathized with them, and outfought them for the rewards of virtue and piety. As a rising ecclesiastic you must have judged them one by one; let this be the hour of collective judgment. Did you find these heirs to apostolic responsibilities duly sanctified by their high mission? Could you rejoice that they, whatever their infirmities, were at least consecrated men, who had experienced a change of heart by fastening their collars in reverse? Were you never haunted by the thought that the very conditions of their existence—their segregation, their compulsory professionalism, their assumption of mystical superiority—bore the seeds of spiritual degeneracy and accounted for the bitter frustration, the envy, malice, and uncharitableness of the typical parson? In your hours of despondency, when the truth had got the better of your professional optimism, did these creatures set apart from the human family appear to you as superhuman—or subhuman?"

"Well," replied the Bishop amiably, "not definitely superhuman."

"Then Trollope is not wholly without justification! But is not some glimmering of superhumanity to be expected *ex hypothesi*? Were I to follow in your footsteps, my lord, I should be sustained by the hope that, by virtue of my vocation and my pious apprenticeship—to say nothing of those supernatural influences upon which you have doubtless expatiated eloquently in preparing candidates for ordination—I should acquire, and make manifest to the world, a keener sensitivity to the higher graces of mind and heart than could be expected in the common man, absorbed by his secular preoccupations. Such, in my adolescent zeal, is my conception of the clerical profession, and I make

bold to say that it is not only strictly orthodox but phrased as if it were a quotation from one of your lordship's early sermons. And now I ask you to consider what proportion of your colleagues are according to specification?"

The Bishop emptied his glass and bent his gaze on the decanter, wondering whether this unprecedented experience did not deserve an addition to his normal ration for meditation.

"I should require to consider such a computation with extreme care before venturing a decision," he said. "The result might or might not satisfy your pessimistic predilections. In the meantime, let me advance a more intimate conclusion. Since you experience such zeal, and embrace so high a conception of the sacred calling, then in God's name go forward. In every walk of life a man receives according to what he brings. The child is father to the man."

"Is he really?" The young man sat up suddenly. "Is the child always father to the man? I wonder. Some children, my lord, might find it difficult to recognize their offspring in dreadful maturity, just as some men find it difficult to recognize the children they once were."

His smile deepened and became at once more wistful and more mischievous. The Bishop, however, was in no mood for complicated aphorisms. He filled up his glass, drank from it, and held it before him as if it were something stable and comprehensible in a dissolving world. Then he began an oration which he considered to be, as he advanced from exposition to argument and from argument to triumphant conclusion, the noblest of a noble series. He recounted his odyssey as a humble pilgrim of the Lord, a pilgrim who had never lost the inexpressible enthusiasm of his novitiate, who had set his course by the eternal stars, who had been rewarded far beyond his deserts, and even beyond his hopes. As he approached his peroration he rejoiced at the heartfelt conviction that few men could have spoken more convincingly in their own justification. Searching for

an apposite text to provide a fitting crown for his achievement, he paused—and realized that he was alone. His visitor had vanished as suddenly and as silently as he had appeared.

The clock chimed the hour of ten; the door opened and his wife appeared. God be thanked, she was the same gentle, grey, domestically-efficient figure as of old. Here was no mocking hallucination, but a tangible proof that the foundations of his world still stood.

“I did not disturb you earlier, my dear,” she said, “although important news came an hour ago. The Archbishop’s illness has taken a decided turn for the worse.”

The Bishop’s soul reared like a warhorse at the blast of a trumpet. Had he shouted under the shock he would not have surprised himself, but after the first wave of exultation he looked round furtively to make sure that no sardonic stripling was hovering in this critical hour. Composing his expression to harmonize with the sufferings of an Archbishop, he turned for comfort to his wife, only to be seized by a unique pang of scepticism. After all these years of intimate collaboration, what did he really know of the inner thoughts of this companion of his pilgrimage? Was she merely a satellite, content to follow the orbit he ordained and to reflect his increasing glory; or had she a mind of her own—a mind that probed and criticized, and nourished in secret the baleful judgments he had lately heard from the untrammelled lips of youth? Had she . . . in a word, had she read Trollope?

He almost asked her the question, but realized in time that it would certainly, with its apparent irrelevance, induce in her the doubts he was beginning to feel about his sanity and the existence of a rational universe. While he collected his disordered wits he heard himself murmur: “Poor, poor man: how sad.”

“Yes, of course, death is always sad,” responded his wife, in a tone that made his banal remark seem like a

profound comment on the passing of a dear friend; "but the Archbishop has had a long and distinguished life, and no one would desire to prolong his present pain. It was Lady Ardingly who gave me the news. She added that Lord Ardingly would be glad if you would make it convenient to dine with him after the meeting on Thursday. You will be the only guest."

No one could appreciate better than the Bishop the significance of this information. Lord Ardingly was the embodiment of Church and State in holy matrimony; his name was held in reverence by every clergyman who had any expectation of a better world. To dine alone with Lord Ardingly was to taste the assurance of beatification. Nevertheless the Bishop wished that his wife had not been quite . . . well, not quite so blunt, so matter of fact. The circumstances, viewed in the right spirit, possessed a certain solemnity, a suggestion, faint yet definite, of the odour of sanctity. A Bishop's wife should not have presented them as if they implied little more than the culmination of a series of business negotiations.

In spite of his irritation over this display of indifference to spiritual qualities, the Bishop was not unmindful that his dear wife's manner was precisely the same as on previous occasions when his elevation had been imminent. Something had happened to make him sensitive for the first time about her cool, practical outlook on ways and means. Yes, indeed, something had happened; something that destroyed the perfection of confident anticipation, made his wife's prattle about the architecture and furnishings of a certain exalted dwelling seem ghoulish, and sent him up to bed feeling that he had grown old since nine o'clock.

In his prayers he was very emphatic about the Archbishop, but his insistence upon the advisability of a physiological miracle brought him no comfort. On this fateful night an old, spent man was forcing his thoughts forward as implacably as the ghost of a young man was forcing them backward. Sleep was so long in coming

that he thought of creeping down to his library and selecting a devotional work of established efficacy for such occasions, but the enterprise was beyond him. He had a haunting conviction that whatever volume he took from his shelves would, when he opened it in his bedroom, turn out to be *Barchester Towers*.

IV

WHEN THE DEVIL WAS ILL . . .

As a soldierly gallant and a gallant soldier, Roger de Lanore realized that the moment had come for a swift retreat. Familiar with the tendency of husbands to indulge in untimely returns, he had, on entering the room in which the feast in honour of Bacchus and Venus had been prepared by a hand as expert as it was beautiful, surveyed the means of escape. Nothing would have pleased him more than to await this cursed lord, now bellowing in the entrance hall for lights, and to dispatch him on a journey from which he would never return. But alas! a dead body—even that of a hectoring husband—was a dubious gift to lay at the feet of a mistress. Moreover, my lady's eye was compelling.

Unbuckling his sword, he wrapped it in his cloak and thrust the bundle into her arms. Her well-trained servants, he was sure, would delay their master long enough to enable her to conceal it, to clear the table of incriminating details, and to compose herself to receive her owner with a tender tale of how her prayers for his restoration to her arms that very night had been miraculously answered. The low-voiced, dark-eyed, and altogether ravishing Helene might be destined never to be his mistress, but with himself out of the way she was unquestionably an accomplished mistress of the situation now confronting her.

With a gesture of farewell and understanding, Roger opened the casement and stepped on to the balcony. The faint moonlight of a hazy October night aided him, while counselling silence and speed; the pestilent cuckold might have entered from the river and posted men on watch. Swinging his legs over the balustrade, Roger slid down a supporting column, paused on the terrace for a swift look around, drew a long breath, and then dropped as quietly as might be into the water.

Many a time, on the field of battle and in knightly brawls, de Lanore had been touched by the hand of death; these chill reminders of mortality had but tempered a spirit glowing in the heat of battle. Now, as he plunged, he felt death strike to his marrow. The river ran as cold as the glacier-womb that gave it birth, and he had a vision of his soul imprisoned in a corpse frozen for all eternity. Eternity, indeed, seemed to pass before he rose to the surface and could release his bursting lungs. For an instant of terror he feared that, unable to move a limb, he must sink again, but by a miracle for which he thanked the whole choir of Saints he contrived to keep afloat and guide his course in the rapid current through the first arch of the bridge and so to an eddy that carried him to a shelving shore.

Some minutes later Roger was thundering at the door of his house, shouting for Gaspard, Pierre, and Jean. The result was silence, save for the curses hurled by neighbours from hastily-opened windows. Rage surged in his veins and almost mastered the shivering of his body. Dogs of dogs, to leave him here to perish while they spent the night drinking and whoring! He would—he must—live to hang all three. The façade of his house was impregnable—but the rear? Down a narrow passage he hurried, heedless of the heaps of refuse, and reached a courtyard where the sole light was a glimmer through the aperture of an unfastened shutter. Pausing neither to bless nor to damn the negligence of his villeins, he flung open the shutter and climbed into the kitchen, where the embers were still glowing on the hearth.

Here at least—God be praised!—was warmth. Here one could strip off sodden clothes and heat a stoup of wine and feel the ague melt out of one's bones. Roger drank deeply—so deeply that when he made his way up to his chamber he could barely hold the smoking torch or utter the blasphemies appropriate to the demoniac shadows that danced upon the walls. So deeply that, although his bed struck as cold as the river, he slept, hearing only as in a dream the bawdy song of his serfs

returning at dawn—a song suddenly stilled by the ominous spectacle of an open shutter and a pile of wet garments.

II

Daylight had broadened before the silence of the house was broken by the clang of an iron bell. Gaspard answered the summons, entering the room with the air of a man approaching his executioner. He dared not look at Roger; and Roger, bitterly lamenting that he lacked the strength to roast this foul pig alive, could hardly bear to look at him. The fury of Hell in his heart, he could do no more than whisper: "Jacques Fernol. Bring him here. At once, on your life."

Gaspard started as if he had been struck with a whip, and the greyness of his face became more deathly. Jacques Fernol! A famous doctor, it was true, but famous only among the infamous. Had Gaspard been ordered to call the Devil himself to the bedside of his master, he could not have been more grossly outraged. In the name of Heaven, was it not enough that he knew his body should soon be carrion; must he now go on an errand that would imperil his immortal soul? Why, the dagger that hung so near his master's hand might slit his throat ere he had time to be shriven!

He shuddered. He also bowed, and hastened to the house of Fernol, and returned with the doctor before Roger's thoughts had reverted from the inspiring prospect of torturing Gaspard to the full consciousness of the pains that racked his own noble body.

Fernol entered: a grave young man, with aquiline features of an almost Jewish cast, and with a restful yet penetrating eye. He gazed down at Roger, and a sardonic smile lightened his expression for a moment.

"You have sinned, my friend."

"You lie!" retorted Roger. "I have sinned not, save in intention, which was balked on this occasion by a husband too jealous of his treasure to leave it unguarded long enough."

"I mean," said Fernol, "that you have sinned

against the divinity of life. We doctors, as I have told you again and again, have no power of absolution over such offences. All we can do is to introduce a little of the mercy of Nature to mitigate the justice of Nature; the magic of the supernatural we leave to others."

"Spare me your philosophy, Fernol. It will bring you to the stake and will not ease the agony in my flesh. Enough for you to know that, for the sin I regret I did not commit, I had to do penance in a river of liquid ice. Now I burn with fever. You may be a heretic, or even an Atheist, or even—as I have heard it said—the Antichrist, but I care not so long as you get me on my feet again and bring the strength back into my sword arm."

Fernol proceeded methodically with his examination, putting few questions with his lips but many with his searching fingers. When the task was completed he straightened himself and gazed thoughtfully at his patient.

"Remembering your debaucheries," he said, "you may be grateful that you have forces remaining to withstand this rude assault. Your man Gaspard—is he to be trusted?"

Roger's eye gleamed. "He was not. He now is. Tell him in my name that his life hangs on it."

"Truly a god-like power," murmured Fernol. "We doctors can do no more than hold death at bay a little longer. You nobles enjoy the power of life and death over your fellow-men."

"Fellow-men!" interjected Roger. "Cattle!"

"As you will. To a humble doctor like myself the difference between man as god and man as beast of the field is not so clearly visible. In our blindness we seek the light of Holy Scripture, which reveals that all men were made in God's own image. Yet I wonder; for when we observe the structure of the true cattle, do we not find the same flesh and bones and organs as in man—as in all men: kings, popes, knights, and serfs? What marks your Gaspard from your ox? What, save that the ox responds to the goad, while Gaspard may be

instructed in the food to be prepared for you and in the potions to be administered at certain hours, and per-adventure may obey. Even as the ox."

Roger cursed him and bade him be gone. "Order the brute as you please," he said, "and assure him, by the bowels of Judas, that one single slip will mean a sword through his heart."

As he opened the door, Fernol paused. "I crave permission," he said, "so that the brute may be fitly encouraged in care and fidelity, to assure him, by the brain of Hippocrates, that no less exalted a being than Roger de Lanore must hold the same warning sacred. A single slip. . . ."

III

Throughout two nights and two days a thousand devils amused themselves with the body of Roger de Lanore. On the evening of the second day the thousand and first devil arrived with a merry invention of his own, which he had perfected after apprenticeship to the Inquisition and a course of advanced instruction at the Papal Palace.

With a prayer for sleep (addressed not only to any Christian Saints who might be concerned but also to Hypnos and Morpheus, in case they were continuing to perform their beneficent duties under the new management), Roger faced the long night hopefully. His aches were no longer agonies, and the exhaustion of his body was almost a pleasant lassitude. But each time his breathing deepened to the rhythm of sleep, the gay little devil slipped a pain like a dagger-thrust into his loins.

An infernally ingenious device indeed, and one to which the thousand devils gave unstinted praise. The author, modestly deprecating his creation in the manner of all great artists, nursed in secret the hope that it would soon be officially adopted in Hell. To the victim, however, it was already Hell; here, in the alternation of mocking relief and unbearable pain, was the supreme torture of the damned. And at the

thought of Hell his fevered body was swathed in icy sweat. God in Heaven, he had completely forgotten Hell! The next thrust, a little deeper and more ruthless, might be his last, and his unshriven soul, with its long unbroken catena of sins and crimes, would be hurled into an eternity of torture.

He struck the iron bell frantically once, twice, thrice, and, before its echoes had faded, Gaspard was at his bedside.

"A priest!" he gasped. "Before I die. A priest!"

Gaspard's feet took wing. He turned and fled so swiftly that Roger could not see the light that had transformed this lousy clod of his into an angelic messenger. Gaspard's ineffable moment had come—the moment he had prayed for, schemed for, stolen for, through years of ever-dying hope. In conducting his master to the doors of Heaven, he would make his own salvation sure. It was no ordinary priest he would bring to the deathbed of the man he hated most, and feared more than he hated him. As he ran, like a man pursued, towards the monastery on the hill, he thought of the fat capons and the rare wines he had filched to mitigate the rigours of the Abbot's ascetic life; he thought of the sides of venison he had carried at dead of night to grace the refectory table on feast days; he thought of the Abbot's gratitude for the detailed inventory of the de Lanore wealth in lands and forests and serfs, and of the pious man's interest in the equally detailed account of the de Lanore debaucheries which so mocked the poverty and austerity of the Church. The exalted Gauzlin, he knew, would see the hand of God in this incredible opportunity for the exercise of his apostolic powers.

Precious minutes were passed in rousing the Abbot, to whom sleep was a divine blessing not to be lightly curtailed. More minutes were occupied in robing him and launching him in his carrying chair. Gaspard, torn between awe of the Abbot, with his attendant monks, and dread of being forestalled by death, could hardly restrain his steps as he led the procession. The

Abbot might doze and his bodyguard might curse; Gaspard was a fountain of fervent and distracted prayer, soaring to the very stars.

While Roger waited, with the devil's knife still methodically prodding at his lumbar region, all he had once learned of the organization and equipment of Hell returned to him. His priestly tutor, who had joyfully thrashed him for rebellion against the Latin tongue and indifference to the incomprehensible writings of the Fathers, had been an expert in the mechanics of divine retribution. Everything that Tertullian or Jerome or Augustine had written on this delectable subject was familiar to him, but greater man than these was his own particular mentor, Berthold of Regensburg. There was a preacher after God's own heart! Roger could see again that disciple of Berthold's, striding up and down, his eyes alight with avenging fire; he could hear him intone the master's question, "How is a man in Hell?" and roar the answer: "If thy whole body were of red-hot iron, and the whole world, from earth to Heaven, one vast fire, and thou in the midst; that is how a man is in Hell, but a hundredfold worse." Strange that these words, which had flowed through his adolescent brain like bubbles on an idle brook, should return to him now; yet not so strange, for was that not his tormentor himself standing in the corner where the shadows were deepest, come from Heaven—or perhaps from the Hell he had known so much about—to warn a dying pupil: "The sinner suffers as many deaths as the motes that dance in the sun. . . . The tortures will endure as many thousand years as there are drops in the sea, for as the number of hairs that have grown on man and beast since God first made Adam . . . and then, after all these years, the pains are only beginning . . . they will endure so long as God is in Heaven."

IV

The Abbot made an imposing figure as he entered and stood gazing sombrely at the sinner poised between

the earth and . . . who shall say? Roger read doom in that gaze, but nothing of the thoughts that lay behind. Gauzlin was calculating the hours that remained for achieving complete surrender; here was a rich prize indeed, to be won by skill and audacity. The cunning of the serpent and the softness of the dove. Twelve hours, twenty-four hours; perhaps more, with the grace of God. Enough, at any rate, for a patient approach.

He began in the softest tones of the mellow voice which, in counsel with penitents, had made his Abbey one of the richest and best-endowed in Christendom. Through compassion for a sufferer who could scarce draw breath, he would spare Roger the ordeal of a full confession and himself recount the grosser sins for which forgiveness and absolution must be sought. If his memory erred in any particular, let the accused raise his hand and speak. If not, let him remain silent.

Roger remained silent. It was not remorse for his iniquities that held him dumb; for the first time in his life he was in the authentic presence of the miraculous. The Abbot unrolled the inventory of sin with the fullness and precision of the Recording Angel. How, other than from a supernatural source, could he have learned the times, places, and intimate details of all those lecheries, and oppressions, and debaucheries, and secret incidents in which the avenging sword and poison-cup had played their part? No suspicion came to him of Gaspard, who now lurked in the background, a quivering lump of gooseflesh; had Roger thought of him at all it would have been to treat the Abbot's power of divination as a minor miracle compared with the vision of that dull and cringing oaf as a skilled and pertinacious spy. The Abbot's figure shone in the flickering candle-light as majestic as that of God himself, and the huge shadow he cast upon the walls was a symbol of divine vengeance.

So Roger listened, alternately afire and shivering with terror, until the Abbot reached the final charge in the indictment and passed, by an easy transition, to a

specification of the Hell for which the sinner had so assiduously prepared himself. Roger felt that his tutor had returned to him, with added learning and a more cultivated zest for the subtleties of the sacred science of torture. All the familiar methods were rehearsed: the fire that burned eternally yet never consumed; the worm that gnawed and was never assuaged; the white-hot pincers and racks and thumbscrews operated by tireless demons. To these commonplaces he added occasional intervals of freezing and moments of relief from pain to give additional poignancy to the ensuing agonies, and for Roger's special edification he invented the delicate prospect of seeking lips that eluded him, of clasping fair bodies that turned to ashes, of seizing brimming goblets that emptied at his touch, of wielding daggers that crumpled as he sought to drive them into the hearts of his tormentors.

Roger raised a shaking hand and, after a few vain efforts to speak, managed a strangled whisper for mercy.

The Abbot placed his finger-tips together in advance of his noble stomach and raised his eyes as if in search for a glimpse of Divine benevolence. His thoughts, however, were concerned with neither Heaven nor Hell; they dwelt upon the fair rich lands of Lanore, their vineyards and granaries, their toiling serfs, their vast and—so far as the Church was concerned—virgin wealth. Lowering his gaze once more upon his victim, he began, in a tone of almost benign sorrow, to explain that all the sins he had recounted were as nought against the sin that remained. God in His wonderful mercy might readily pardon the weakness of the flesh but not the perfidy of the spirit.

"How often," asked the Abbot, in a voice that resounded like the last trump; "how often have you, through the long years of debauchery, attended the offices of the Church? How often, in the midst of your innumerable fornications, have you paused to consider the peril of your immortal soul and the duties of penitence and confession? How often have you not

driven from your door with curses and blasphemies the humble friars who begged alms for the sustenance of the poor? How often, while you dissipated your riches in the service of the Devil, have you vouchsafed a tithe, or even so much as a tithe of a tithe, to minister to the spiritual needs of your people? Roger de Lanore, you lie there, with death and eternal damnation hovering over you, a sinner burdened with a thousand sins, and—oh, crowning infamy!—an unrepentant heretic.”

Roger’s expression informed the Abbot that he had said enough—if not too much. Death, and not the victory of the Church, might be the final act if he did not hasten to soothe. Seating himself by the bedside, he smiled benevolently on the exhausted sufferer.

“The blessed St. Bernard,” he said, “observed that ‘the Devil, terrible to men of the world, is contemptible to the monk.’ Therein lies a profound and, for you, Roger de Lanore, an infinitely merciful truth. Were you to present yourself at Heaven’s gate in the garb of a monk, you—even with your grievous burden of sin—might pass through.”

“I . . . a monk?” gasped Roger.

“Yea, you . . . a monk!” replied the Abbot. “Note how Holy Church may rise superior to the most dreadful of emergencies! When a truly penitent sinner is *in extremis* and his sins are still ripe upon his limbs, Holy Church may, as an act of grace, admit him *ad succurrendum* to its own holy company. As an act of grace, I said; but you may well deem that this act is not performed save on conditions.” He paused to pass his tongue across his lips and to contemplate, for another ecstatic moment, the opulent vision of Lanore. “The Church must be assured of the sinner’s true penitence; he must bear witness to it by his sacrifice of worldly treasures which have been the instrument of his offences and are now as dross. These treasures, so rebelliously denied to the Church, shall pass to the Church and be used by the Church for the glory of God and the saying of Masses for your immortal soul. If this just expiation seem to you too grievous. . . .”

Roger made a frantic sign which the Abbot interpreted to his own complete satisfaction. "To-morrow, then, the ceremony will, by God's grace, be performed." After a lengthy prayer, which he doubtless hoped would have a soporific effect, the Abbot blessed him and retired.

V

The night that followed was for Roger one of recurrent delirium, and for Gaspard one of mingled exultation and anxiety. Having succeeded in putting his seigneur more or less on the path to heaven, Gaspard was haunted by the fear that delirium would be followed by death before the ritual of *ad succurrendum* could be completed. Should he, therefore, summon the doctor in the hope of prolonging Roger's life for the necessary span of hours? In brief, was Antichrist a fitting instrument of Christ's purpose?

This was a theological problem beyond Gaspard's range of casuistry. He debated it until daylight, when an access of delirium, which called for Jean's efforts in addition to his own, forced him to a sudden and desperate decision. Pierre was dispatched with an urgent message to Fernol, and he returned with the news that Fernol was in attendance ten miles from the town and might not return for several hours.

So it chanced that Fernol arrived when the conversion of de Lanore into a monk was still in process. Gaspard ushered him into the library and begged him to wait there a few moments—moments which Fernol passed amiably in examining the volumes, inherited from Roger's scholarly father, in that little-used apartment. Among the quarto and folio volumes, of the classics his eye was drawn to a little book with a worn cover. Opening it, his expression became suddenly intent, and he was still turning over the pages when Gaspard entered.

"With my patient's permission," said Fernol, "I shall borrow this book for a day or two."

Gaspard bowed, and led the doctor to the bedside.

Fernol made no comment on the cloak and cowl in which his patient was now clothed; even the faint sardonic smile that touched his lips was gone before Gaspard could observe it. His examination was brief, and he stood for several minutes in deep thought before he spoke.

"In two hours," he said, "I shall bring a potion which I myself will administer. Then I shall watch for a spell to learn whether it means life . . . or not." Then he turned to go, and, as he reached the door, paused and looked back. "It may comfort you to know," he added, "that the potion was the creation, and enjoys the fervent sanction, of a Saint."

As the Cathedral bell sounded the signal of the Elevation at the hour of noon, Fernol returned with a vial of dark green liquor, which he administered in spoonfuls between Roger's pallid and babbling lips. Gaspard watched the proceedings with anxious interest, crossing himself as the patient shuddered with each convulsive swallow. Although Fernol had told him that the potion was a saintly drug, what assurance had a faithful son of the Church that it was not a devil's brew? So he waited until his master's murmurs grew intermittent and finally died away. He looked questioningly at Fernol, who nodded and dismissed him with a gesture which was a command for silence.

For more than an hour Fernol, with his fingers on the patient's wrist, waited for the expected change. At last he saw the perspiration appear on Roger's brow, first in tiny beads and then in gathering drops. "*Ita missa est*," he whispered to himself—the phrase being, he considered, a compliment to the cowl now soaked in authentic monkish sweat. But not until twilight fell and Gaspard crept in to attend to the lamps did he relax his vigil.

"He sleeps," said Fernol.

VI

Alas! How ignorant these atheistic doctors are about what is really happening to their patients! "He

sleeps" indeed; when the essential Roger—that is to say, the spiritual Roger—was engaged upon a celestial excursion of the most delectable description. As the potion had begun to operate, he felt an ineffable peace and an intoxicating sense of lightness. "If I willed," he heard himself say, "I could soar." And soar he did, up through the ceiling, through the dusty attics, through the roof, and out into the dusk over the city. He looked down upon the twinkling lamps and upon the shining course of the river in which he had been urgently immersed. For a moment he regretted that his ascension was not illuminated, so that the sinners down below might be aware of the miracle vouchsafed to one of their most distinguished fellow-citizens. His abiding thought, however, was that the Abbot, God bless him, had done his duty. Since the trajectory was vertically upwards, the aristocratic soul snatched from the edge of the pit was undoubtedly shooting towards the gate of Heaven.

In due course he was able to contemplate the solar system as a whole, but since his attention had hitherto been directed to relations more intimate than those of the sun and the planets he was unable to appreciate the opportunity of confirming the observations of his brother of the cloister, Copernicus, or of contributing to the discussion between the Pope and Galileo. He continued to soar until he reached a void dimly lit by distant stars, and there he came slowly to a stop, as if he had reached a region too divinely rare for the continued elevation of so recent a monk.

It was a disturbing experience, with its suggestion of delay and even of a possible descent. Before Roger, in his lamentable ignorance of the etiquette of Heaven, could resolve the problem, he heard a voice say, "Greeting, brother!"

He could see nobody, but had the sense of a near presence, too benign to be associated with the section of eternity best known to the Abbot and Roger himself.

"Who are you?" he asked, "Are you St. Peter?"

"No; merely a minor saint—St. Ambrosius of Louesmes. Are you, too, returning to Earth?"

"By the body of Bacchus, no!" exclaimed Roger. "I have just arrived from there."

"Ah, a newcomer. And one, I fear, who has never heard of St. Ambrosius of Louesmes?"

"I do not think we have met before."

"Probably not, since two centuries and more have passed since I lived on Earth."

"Good!" cried Roger. "You will surely be able to tell me: am I yet near to Heaven?"

"Heaven!" exclaimed the Saint. He paused, and Roger heard a faint tinkling echo of laughter, as if the stars were merry. "Heaven! How strange it is to hear that word again; how it takes me back to my childhood, to the dear innocent, credulous days before I entered upon my vocation."

"In God's name, what do you mean? Do you mean that Heaven . . .?"

"In God's name, if you so please, I shall answer you. I am, as I have but now informed you, a Saint. The honour was unexpected and unsought, but it was bestowed in due order, and my name is still on the Calendar. Yet I know no more of Heaven than do you."

"Then Hell too . . .?"

"Ah, Hell! Hell, perhaps, is less difficult to discover, though it lies nowhere on this side of the veil. Listen, brother, and I may open your eyes even now. I was but an indifferent friar. I took the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, in response to a pious mother's prayers. The first vow I kept, since I belonged to a new order then uncorrupted by wealth; the second I kept indifferently well, and the third not at all. The people among whom I preached of Heaven and Hell were the peasants of a beautiful and fertile land. Bondsmen and bondswomen, they were bought and sold like cattle; they were housed worse than cattle; they were driven with whips to labour and flung aside to rot when the lash could no longer rouse them; they were the victims of a tyranny so firmly riven upon their necks that Holy

Church itself accepted it as the will of God. How could I mock these stricken souls with chatter about the bliss of Heaven? How could I touch them to virtue by threats of Hell hereafter, when Hell was their own familiar home?"

"An indifferent friar indeed!" scoffed Roger. "I know these peasants. . . ."

"As I admitted," pursued the Saint, "truly an indifferent friar. I moved among these ordained iniquities as helpless, if not quite as acquiescent, as the Church. Yet not perhaps so helpless. When I passed from village to village, from hovel to hovel, vainly ministering to the needs of the soul, I was haunted by the neglected, the agonizing, needs of the body. There were times when, as I sat beside some wretch who was dying slowly—ah! too, too slowly!—I felt that the felicitous words of divine consolation I murmured were a Satanic mockery; I asked myself, with the terror of blasphemy in my heart, whether Christ upon the cross had suffered like one of these."

"There, surely," said Roger, "was a sin to rouse the wrath of your confessor."

"He never knew of it," answered the Saint. "I felt that the issue lay between myself and God. The question was one that Christ alone could answer. But would Christ, who seemed to have so little to say to Popes and Cardinals, trouble about the bewilderment of a mere friar? I was meditating upon these things one day while I rested beside a stream, refreshing my way-worn feet in the cool waters. The little valley was very beautiful; it was also very peaceful. Yet with the song of birds, the hum of insects, and the movement of animals in the undergrowth, it was full of life. Gay, abundant life! So the thought came to me that Nature had achieved her own harmony, that Nature had found a cure for Nature's ills. And I conceived the thought that peradventure Nature would provide the cure for the ills of mankind as well."

"An edifying thought, no doubt," interrupted Roger, "but . . ."

"But one lacking in logical justification? I agree. I fear I yielded to the temptation, from which not even the Fathers of the Church were exempt, of embracing a conclusion that pleased me and proclaiming it a revelation, without pausing to examine it critically and discover that its beauty was merely that of a comforting illusion. However, the thought inspired me to search for these remedies in the pharmacopoeia of Nature. Some of them were known to my own mother, who was skilled in the lore of herbs. Others were known, or alleged to be known, to the witches and wise women who were cursed by the Church as the harlots of Satan. I did not scruple to seek out these dark half-demented creatures, ostensibly to save their souls but in reality to learn what I might of their secret spells and potions, to discover if they who battered on the ignorance and superstitious terrors of the peasants had some grains of saving knowledge that I, a Religious, did not possess. Above all, I cultivated my garden, where I planted rare herbs, distilling from them strange essences, which I administered to animals in the hope of learning their virtues."

"And discovered some poisons of great virtue, I make no doubt," said Roger. "The Vatican . . ."

"I soon discovered," Ambrosius replied, "that the art of poisoning is simple and the art of healing infinitely complex. Nevertheless I persevered, and as the years passed on I became known as 'the Healing Friar'—a title as grateful to me as it was distasteful to my spiritual superiors, whose notions of the functions of a priest were not influenced by any considerations of pity for festering pain-racked bodies. But they dared not attempt to force me to desist, not merely because they feared the anger of the people, but because I filled their churches with penitents who had at last found a reason for gratitude to Holy Church. Although they knew full well that all my medicines were drawn from their own fields and forests, they persisted in believing that every one of them was possessed of a supernatural virtue. The abatement of a colic; the

passing of a fever; the healing of a wound—all was miracle!

“Now mark the sequel, my brother. It had been my custom to make my simpler remedies known to all, so that the humblest bondslave might compound a laxative, a febrifuge, a salve for wounds. My subtler remedies I recorded for the benefit of those skilled in the compounding of drugs and in the observation of disease. Thus after my death the specifics of the Healing Friar continued to be used. Generation succeeded generation until the very name of the Healing Friar had been almost forgotten. Ah, yes, friend Roger, I came very near to extinction. It chanced, however, that a Cardinal suffering grievously from the effects of a more than usually violent debauch was snatched from death by my masterpiece, a drug of diabolical potency yet divine discretion. In gratitude for the opportunity of resuming his picturesque career on earth, the Cardinal inquired the source of his bodily salvation and, having learned it, set on foot an agitation for the canonization of the Healing Friar. The records of the Order gave him some information, and the legends of the countryside, some of which sprang up suddenly when the Cardinal's inquiries opened, gave him ample material admirably fitted for his purpose. In due course St. Ambrosius was created. The Cardinal, by the way, prayed to his saint at every twinge or ache; he was certain that Ambrosius would lend an effective ear to petitions from the prelate who had secured an exalted position in Heaven for a mere friar. Nevertheless, the Cardinal did not die of old age. We met once afterwards—somewhere in the region of Acturus—and made merry over the whole affair. But the Cardinal, I fear, is gone now. Quite gone. Which reminds me, by the way, that I must be going—in another sense, however.”

“Going? Going where?”

“Why, down to Earth. Have you forgotten that this is All Soul's Day, when the spirits of the departed revisit their ancient haunts and commune with any of the living who happen to remember them?”

"Of course I've heard about it," replied Roger, rather testily, "but I never imagined that it really happened."

"Well, I can assure you it does. And a vitally important affair it is too."

"Vitally important? To a saint?"

"To all of us. You see, if, when you descend, you find nobody who has the slightest recollection of you, that's the end of everything for you."

"The end? But what about Heaven, and Hell, and Eternal Life?"

"What about them? Ah, I ask your pardon; I keep forgetting that you are a newcomer. I fear, however, that I cannot stop to discuss these ancient legends now. Perhaps we shall meet again. . . ."

"Wait a moment, please! Do you really mean to tell me that this is all that happens to everybody, saved and sinner alike?"

"Well, why not? It is quite an entertaining existence, moving amidst the celestial spheres and meeting all sorts of people, most of them distinguished, of course, since the others have become extinct. The great tyrants and criminals and scoundrels of history are, as you will readily understand, the most enduring. For example, who can forget Nero, or Caligula, or Attila, or Pope Alexander, or Casanova? I have found them a most interesting study, and a notable relief from the edifying company of philosophers and saints. Indeed, I am quite willing to continue for a few centuries more. Then, in all probability, St. Ambrosius will be completely forgotten and I, since it is not feasible for me to return to cultivate the little garden I have never ceased to cherish in my heart, shall be quite content to become as I was before I was born. Farewell—or, as we used to say in the quaint old days, God be with you!"

VII

Roger awoke to find the doctor gazing upon him with an expression of mingled gratification and wonder.

"You have returned," said Fernol.

Roger surveyed his surroundings to make sure that he was indeed back in the old familiar room; then he said, in a solemn and almost regretful tone: "I have returned."

"Not many hours ago," remarked the doctor, "I feared that you were going on a journey from which no man returns. Now—as we agree—you have returned."

"It was from that very journey that I have returned," Roger assured him. "I have visited the region of departed souls, and I have returned."

"Indeed? Then your case is even more interesting than I, as your doctor, imagined it to be."

"I suspect," Roger complained, "a certain levity in your remark. Let me repeat: I died. I visited the next world. I learned the truth about the life beyond death. I have returned."

"A most profitable excursion," observed the doctor, feeling the patient's pulse. "I trust the information you received was not given to you under a bond of secrecy?"

"On the contrary, it was a revelation the whole world must share. Doctor Fernol, there is no Heaven. There is no Hell. There is no Judgment Seat. There is no Purgatory."

"So much," observed Fernol, "has already been suspected by many men, learned and unlearned."

"And what is more, there is no Eternal Life. After death we live only so long as we are remembered by the living."

"So poetic a conception is also familiar to me. It lends a graceful touch of consolation to the prospect of eternal sleep."

Roger rebuked him with a glance which would have done credit to the Abbot in his most comminatory mood. "As soon as I am strong again," he declared, "I shall proclaim my revelation to the whole world."

"How prudent, to wait until you are strong again! As your medical adviser—which I trust I shall remain in spite of your novel eminence—I counsel that you wait

until you are strong enough to face the rack and the stake."

Roger made a grimace. "I fear them not," he said, in a tone which he hoped would carry conviction to himself as well as to Fernol.

"A fearless soldier!" exclaimed Fernol, "and one who, being now clad as a monk, looks eagerly forward to the joys of martyrdom. But let me give some body and colour to the prospect that awaits the founder of this new-old heresy. First of all, there is the Abbot. When he learns that he is to lose the wealth of Lanore which was the price of your sartorial passport to paradise, he will find exquisite compensation in flaying you with his own hands and then boiling what remains of you in oil for an hour or so, as a preliminary to the more refined tortures of which he is a supreme connoisseur. His one fear will be that the Inquisition, which he regards as an amateur in the sacred art of saving the eternal soul through the infinite sufferings of the body, will seize you first and leave him nothing but your dismembered corpse."

Closing his eyes, Roger meditated for a few moments. "The Abbot," he said, "will be my first convert. When I tell him that Hell does not exist. . . ."

Fernol chuckled. "Oh *sancta simplicitas*! To think of robbing an Abbot of his most precious jewel! My dear de Lanore, to us Hell may be a thing apart; 'tis an Abbot's whole existence. Why not seek your first convert here? I shall be charmed to be the chosen vessel of the new religion."

"I would prefer the Abbot," said Roger, modestly. "You are one of those who scoffingly advance a material explanation for spiritual events."

"Admittedly," replied Fernol, "I prefer the natural to the supernatural. Which is to say, I prefer the known to the unknown. Nevertheless I am an eager student of the supernatural. Let me have the full history of your spiritual adventures; the effort will at least prepare you for your exalted mission to the Church and the World."

After a show of hesitation, Roger complied, embellishing his story with various additions which, he trusted, would make it more convincing to the sceptical mind. He was not, however, altogether reassured by the smile that played now and again on the countenance of his hearer.

"This delectable saint of yours," said Fernol, when the recital was ended; "he did not greet you as an old acquaintance?"

"Of course not! I had never heard of him before!"

"Never?"

"Never! I swear, by the sacred relics of St. Omphalos, that I did not know of his existence until I met his spirit among the stars."

"Your oath is not notably convincing, but I believe that you think you are speaking the truth."

"Then how can you doubt that I have been accorded a beatific vision?"

"I do not *doubt*! I *know*. Did St. Ambrosius tell you that he had been tried on three occasions for heresy, and that amidst the charges of consorting with witches and indulging in black arts there were accounts of the very doctrines he expounded to you? No? And perhaps he did not also mention that the indictments also included references—of a very casual nature, I admit, as the issue was trifling—to his relations with the young women of the countryside. Nor did you, I venture to conclude, tell him that you yourself had commented upon these references to the following effect: that if every Religious were to be expelled for *liaisons dangereuses* with penitents, there would be mortally few friars or monks or priests or Cardinals or Popes left to grace—or disgrace—the earth?"

Roger stared at him in bewilderment, wondering whether he or Fernol had gone mad. The ironic touch in Fernol's smile suggested another explanation; perhaps the doctor, notorious for his irreverence towards spiritual powers, was aggravating his sin to a truly unpardonable degree by displaying levity towards a distinguished lord of the earth. With an air of

apostolic menace Roger rebuked him for his unseemly mirth.

"Mirth," retorted Fernol, "is always unseemly to the victim. But you may spare me the threat of the rack and the dungeon. I spoke not in mirth, but in a spirit that appeals even more to me—the spirit of a plain statement of fact. How many years have passed since you entered your library?"

"Your question is insolent," replied Roger; "doubly insolent, since you are aware of the innumerable affairs that occupy a man of my position in the world."

"Indeed I am. And so is all the world. Thanks to the pressure of affairs—the latest of which brought me to your exalted bedside—you have utterly forgotten the existence, among the books that form the most precious part of your inheritance, of a volume recounting the life of the Healing Friar. It was written by a member of my own profession—and a man after my own heart, since he presents the facts, the legends, and the speculations in their true dimensions and colours with scholarly detachment and impartiality. So skilfully did he perform his revealing work that the Congregation of the Index did not perceive the subversive significance of the revelation. The hierarchy of the Church, my dear Roger, are not distinguished by a nose for humour. Also were its inner virtues undetected by yourself. The margins are freely fouled with comments, mostly ribald and occasionally fatuous, in your own youthful hand."

Roger lay silent in an effort to revive and hold memories, shadowy like the recollections of a dream. His youth seemed so far away!

"It pains me," said Fernol, "to suggest that your beatific vision was merely the revival of knowledge that had lain dormant in the depths of your mind until roused by the heat of fever. So sad is it when an illusion dies under the poignard of truth! To you, who wear the monkish garb so becomingly, it must be a profound tragedy. Yet *sursum corda*! I, even I, can administer some ghostly consolation to your deflated soul. It is the habit of spiritual convictions to rise

again after a painful death. In three days or less you will be saying to yourself: 'What is a mere material fact against a divine experience?' What, indeed! The thought that you were snatched from Hell in order that you might be informed of the non-existence of Hell by a veritable saint will nourish your vanity so potently that the absurdity of the thought will be to you as non-existent as Hell itself."

"These are questions," interposed Roger, "which I shall discuss with the Abbot."

"By all means. Yet remember that he also has his illusions, and that such a man's illusions, even if entertained for purely professional purposes, are impenetrable armour against other men's illusions. The Abbot will certainly, in his inner mind, consider you as mad as an Albigenian. He will consider that, if there are visions about, they should be vouchsafed by some exalted personage of unimpeachable orthodoxy to a worthy object such as an Abbot, not by a minor saint, with a sulphurous record, to a habitual sinner who never bestowed more than a few paltry crowns on the Church in the course of his licentious career. Nevertheless the Abbot may dissemble; he may smile upon you as upon a roasted capon he intends to consume so thoroughly that naught but the bones will remain. Only after your wealth is in his scrip will he be moved to admit the authenticity of your vision. In fine, he will make a veritable monk of you, and will see to it that you scrupulously observe the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience—especially the first."

"I shall acquaint the Abbot with your slanderous accusations," declared Roger.

"By all means. The Abbot and I are excellent friends; he has often said that I know the secrets of the ecclesiastical soul even more intimately than I do those of the human body. And I can assure you that whether or not he decides to exploit your vision, he will exploit *you*. If he allows you to return your cowl, it will be at a price. A bargain, he will cogently remind you, is a bargain. When he comes to you, as he surely will come,

with great expectations, meet him with a *non possumus* delivered with that haughty bluster you have cultivated from your golden cradle. Then, as he threatens excommunication and the thumbscrew and all the other processes of Christian persuasion, yield a little, and a little more, and then a little more, each time swearing that you will yield no more. In the end he will agree to accept a moiety of your riches, bestowing upon you, in return, your freedom and his blessing, accompanied by absolution and any indulgences you may care to specify. What remains of your wealth should be ample to enable you to resume the carnal indulgences which have hitherto been your chief preoccupations. Should it not be ample, you may feel an impulse to devote a moiety of your time to the neglected stewardship of your vast estates. In which case you may discover—as the Healing Friar discovered long ago—the hell in which labour the men and women who pay the price of your nobility.”

“When I am in need of a sermon,” said Roger testily, “I shall ask the Abbot to preach to me.”

“He will preach to you without being asked, as you will shortly discover. But you will be constrained to pay his price, which will make you wince more than any exhortations of mine. My sermons, as it happens, are without price. Such modest fees as I exact are for medicine to the body.”

Roger’s eye brightened. “But what,” he cried, “if it was not your medicine that cured me? What if I owe my life to the intervention of St. Ambrosius? You may scoff at my vision, yet if I tell you that I have an inner sense of the miraculous and maintain that St. Ambrosius rescued me from death, what then have you to answer?”

Fernol rose; he opened his arms in a gesture of acquiescence and laughed outright.

“As a matter of indubitable fact,” he replied, “you do owe your life to St. Ambrosius.”

“Ah! You admit it? ’Twas a saint, then, not a learned doctor?”

“Assuredly it was a saint. When you were on the

threshold I administered to you a potion compounded according to the instructions of the Healing Friar, recorded in the little book you once read with such contemptuous interest and then forgot. It was his sovereign remedy, and it operated with a speed and efficacy which you may well describe as miraculous, although it contained nothing but distillations from the humblest herbs. So you, my illustrious master, are indeed a living witness to the saving power of St. Ambrosius! He it was who, with a cunning drug, has restored you to the arms of your ardent ladies and to the companionship of your rivals in debauchery. Doubtless it is a tragic blow to your vanity that the power did not reach you by a supernatural visitation from the Saint, but merely through a sceptical doctor who recorded the Saint's *materia medica*, and another sceptical doctor who lighted upon the record. Nevertheless, does even your vanity cajole you into believing that angels and ministers of grace would stir themselves among the stars to save the life of a man who, greatly gifted and richly endowed, chose to let his mind and body rot in follies despised by the lowest of his serfs. . . ."

"Enough!" exclaimed Roger, trying to raise himself.

"Yes, enough," assented Fernol, pressing him gently back and rearranging the disorder of the bed. "You must rest. You must rest, and meditate on the life of the Healing Friar; here is the book, to refresh your memory and awaken in you a sense of the man you might have been and may yet be. I would have saved your life even had you been Gaspard, who spies upon you and betrays you because of his contempt for you, or the Abbot who trades souls with a God made in his own image. Like the Healing Friar, and unlike the Abbot's God, I am no respecter of persons: I succour those, good or evil, wise or foolish, who need succour. Still, I take with me the appealing thought that we can both pay homage to one and the same Saint—you because he has restored to you the sovereign gift of life, and I because he has bestowed upon me the knowledge of one more precious aid for suffering humanity.

V

AFTER THE FALL

THE Cherubim had been duly posted at the eastern entrance to the Garden, and the flaming sword, wielded by the corporal of the guard, turned every way in a thoroughly orthodox fashion. So engrossed was the Cherub in this amusing task and in the prospects of promotion to the rank of Seraph that he gave no heed to the disconsolate figures slowly departing into the wide, wide world. Nor did he observe the approach of Lucifer, whose habit of suddenly materializing at dramatic moments made him unpopular in angelic circles and earned him the rank of patron-saint of newspaper representatives.

Lucifer watched the manœuvres of the flaming sword with a sardonic smile.

"A charming and enthralling display," he said. "But for whose benefit? Not, surely, to impress the father and mother of all living, since, as you doubtless observe, they present to it a pair of blind backs."

"I am merely carrying out orders."

"And incidentally affording yourself and your squad of Cherubs a great deal of innocent entertainment. Were your orders, I wonder, inspired by a fear that the exiles would seek to return? If so, I suggest that there has been a certain inadequacy of foreknowledge in high quarters. Not that such a phenomenon would startle me. The entire proceeding," he went on, with a wave of the hand towards the empty Garden, "appears to illustrate precisely that phenomenon. Don't you agree?"

The question was flung at the Cherub in the manner of one philosopher seeking confirmation from another, but the Cherub found the compliment embarrassing and nearly dropped the sword.

"Carry on, child," proceeded Lucifer. "I should

have remembered that your youthful mind takes everything for granted as the best that could happen in the best possible of all worlds. You leave the discussion of the ultimate mysteries to more mature immortals. But tell me, have any of our celestial forces been detailed to accompany the lord of creation and his helpmeet? After having been nursed and cossetted in a well-appointed Garden, are they to be left to fend for themselves in the wild, like the beasts of the field and with no official advice beyond the injunction, rather superfluous perhaps, to be fruitful and multiply?"

"I don't know," snapped the Cherub, heartily wishing that his questioner would . . . well, would return to his spiritual home and stay there.

"Curious!" mused Lucifer. "I appear to be the only Spirit who perceives that what happens to those outcasts to-day may determine the fate of their incalculable progeny, world without end, amen. The last dawn of reckoning will read what the first morning of creation writes. Now, where did I encounter that sapient reflection? No matter; the point is that I have the wit to appreciate its wisdom and to seize the opportunity of observing how these forlorn creatures, after the fiasco of their sheltered existence, will set about the use of their freedom. Possibly, moreover, I may be able to exercise a certain degree of influence, to bend the infant shoot, to bias the nascent impulse, to guide the first steps which mean so much. It irks me to find the products of inventive optimism treated with such contemptuous neglect, as if they were the sole authors instead of the prime victims of the great experiment. Judicious interference here, subtle suggestion there: so may I put a little ginger into Adam's soul and introduce an element of dramatic surprise into the predestined course of mundane events. At least it will be agreed that matters could not be worse than they are, and in any event it will relieve the tedium of eternity to insert a few amendments in the initial terms of the human series and observe their development along the chain of heredity and environment. Don't you think so?"

Again Lucifer flung the question at the bewildered Cherub; without waiting for a reply, he brought his wings over his face with a metallic clang and vanished. The Cherub blinked but resumed his pyrotechnic duties, which, for all that is known to the contrary, are still being maintained on orthodox lines. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed the appearance of a black panther, which moved off in the tracks of Adam and Eve. A black panther as graceful as Lucifer himself; with a coat as velvety as night, and eyes in which glowed a light not extinguished by the mounting sun.

The panther caught up with Adam and Eve in time to hear the first words spoken since they had left the Garden.

"May I ask," said Eve, in a tone of extreme sweetness relieved by acidulated venom, "where we are supposed to be going? You as my lord and master doubtless know some place in this horrible wilderness suitable for a residence. Or am I supposed to walk and walk and walk until I am a mass of aches and pains?"

Adam lifted his gaze from the ground and stared over the foreground of rolling scrub to the forests that rose in green waves to the blue mountains.

"I suppose," he replied, "we shall find a place somewhere."

"You suppose! You suppose! And I suppose that all you will ever manage to do is to go on supposing. Of all the feeble, futile creatures! If you had any gumption at all you could have found me a bower like the one we had in Paradise and would never have lost but for your stupidity and vanity."

"I dare say," ventured Adam, "I shall be able to fix you up somewhere."

"I dare say you will not. I expect that, as usual, I shall have to do all the finding and the fixing. But if you are going to be so wonderfully clever and do everything, will you please bear in mind that in Paradise we were people of importance, enjoying the most exalted

patronage and the society of immortals, to say nothing of the respectful services of the beasts of the field and the fowls of the air. What, may I inquire, have you to offer to make up for these?"

"Well," responded Adam, "it seems to me—correct me if I'm wrong—rather a tall order to expect the same amenities outside Paradise as inside. The exalted patronage and the social courtesies of the immortals must, I fear, be done without. I confess, however, to being rather piqued by the indifference of the animals and the fowls. After all the trouble I took to name them all—a colossal task, I can assure you—it is disheartening to find that not a single one of them takes any notice of us—not one, except the panther now at our heels."

"Oh!" cried Eve, "if you are going to find compensation in a slinking panther. . . ."

Before Adam could reply the panther padded forward, his tail twitching and his eyes glowing more balefully than ever. But Adam's retort was not long in coming: it was prefaced by a grin of impish joy.

"Well," he said, "at least the panther does not wriggle on his belly like a certain creature with whom you were on visiting terms not so very long ago."

His joy was short-lived, swept away in a torrent of eloquence which sent all the animals scurrying for shelter and the birds screaming into the distance. High overhead a vulture appeared, hovering in expectation of an early corpse. The flood of vituperation which poured from Eve's lips was a revelation to her lord and master; even the panther was disconcerted for a moment. But only for a moment. When Adam, seizing an interval during which Eve paused for breath, was about to speak, the panther raised a paw to his lips and accompanied the gesture with an arresting glance. Held by this double injunction to silence, Adam kept his peace until Eve advanced in a crescendo of fury to a climax of tears—a novel phenomenon, and so disturbing that Adam turned instinctively to the panther for further guidance.

The panther was unconcernedly washing his face,

and each time his mouth became visible it appeared to carry a satiric grin. Something in the caressing movement gave Adam his cue; he put his arm over Eve's shoulder and wiped her tears away with a strand of hair.

"There, there!" he murmured soothingly; "it was all my fault. Anything's my fault, everything's my fault, so long as you will stop that appalling noise."

Eve looked up at him suddenly and favoured him with a replica of the panther's grin. "All right, I forgive you," she said graciously, and added, with equal irrelevance, "Oh, I am so hungry!"

The panther turned and walked ahead in so purposeful a fashion that Adam concluded the beast knew what was wanted and where it was to be found. But before the panther had gone far he side-stepped among long grasses and flicked on to the path an ostrich feather. Eve pounced upon it with a cry of delight, held it lovingly in both hands, turned it round and round, and then, with a charming gesture, thrust it into her hair so that it dangled over her eyes. Lacking a mirror, she looked at Adam to gauge the effect.

Adam stood open-mouthed. He felt surging within him a peculiar commotion which shook his loins and caught his throat, finding vent at last in a sound which had never been heard in Paradise, and indeed was unknown among the angelic hosts—a mighty roar of laughter. Mighty but short-lived, since in the throes of his paroxysm Adam did not perceive the advancing fury which, with a box on the ear, drove him backwards on to a magnificent specimen of the cactus.

His howl, as the reflex action restored him to his feet, might have been heard by the Cherubim at the gate of Eden. It did not, however, prevent Eve producing, in the treble, the same curious noises as Adam had so recently emitted in the bass. She laughed until the tears ran down her cheeks; these tears, Adam well knew, called for no sympathy, and his distorted countenance showed the direction in which sympathy, combined with practical help, was urgently required.

A minute later he was lying prone, and Eve knelt

beside him, giving first-aid and cooing tenderly and encouragingly as one spine after another was extracted. The scene was a touching one, which the panther observed with decorous gravity.

Peace and comfort having been eventually restored—temporarily at least—he led them towards a grove of palms where many monkeys were chattering, as though at a sitting of the Simian Parliament. Whether the panther, who had bounded into the grove and then returned with the innocent expression of a kitten fresh from the cream jug, did or did not convey a signal to his fellow mammals is not recorded, but the fact remains that the entry of Adam and Eve was heralded by the flight of a coconut. Adam picked it up and balanced it in his hand, totally unaware of the profound significance to the human race of the First Man encountering the First Ball. Then, seeing a face grinning at him from the palm leaves, he hurled the ball at it. A fusillade followed; Eve joined him in replying to it, and Adam realized in a glorious flash of illumination that here was a pastime in which the lord of creation was supreme and his lady a rabbit. He flung coconut after coconut, yelling when he scored a hit, and after a smack on his skull had thoroughly roused his anthropoid blood he shinned up a tree and carried on the fight at point-blank range until the monkeys scattered.

“That,” he said, as he returned and sat down panting beside his mate, “that was heavenly!”

Eve patted his shoulder with a touch of condescension for the childishness of man. (Just so, in later ages, have countless mothers patted the shoulders of sons fresh from triumphs in the cricket field.) Then, with an air of getting to business, she handed him a coconut and said, “See what’s inside it.”

Adam turned it over and over, in mingled doubt and curiosity.

“Go on!” she cried; “it isn’t forbidden fruit.”

“There’s no forbidden fruit now, thank the Lord,” replied Adam, and cracked the nut. As the milk poured out he stared in wonder.

"How on earth," he asked, "did *that* get inside *that*?"

Faced with this mystery, he turned to Eve for enlightenment.

"Stupid!" she cried. "Never mind how. Taste it. Is it good? Yes? Then let me have it."

She drank and she ate while Adam, growing thirstier and hungrier every minute, went on cracking nuts for her. When repletion had supervened, she bade him, with a slight hiccup, help himself.

Towards evening the panther led them to a delectable spot where a miniature waterfall, a wide pool, a grassy bank, and a framework of vines and fig-trees and berry-laden branches formed what was to be described in distant ages as a haunt of ancient peace. Their first reaction was to follow the panther's example in drinking from the pool—a performance achieved with varying degrees of elegance. Sighing with satisfaction, Adam sat on his haunches, gazing around him at the bright colours of the foliage in the warm level rays, listening to the music of the fall and the choir of birds, and watching the rainbow fishes flashing into and out of the recesses of the pool. While he looked and listened his expression changed, as if some new experience, at once delicious and bewildering, had come to him—something beyond precedent or description or understanding. So bemused was he in this unique beatitude that he was hardly aware of the bunch of grapes that Eve had picked and thrust into his hands; mechanically, and with a fine disregard of the inhibitions regarding skins and pips which would distinguish the more cultured of his descendants, he swallowed grape after grape while his wistful eyes moved from the clouds to the trees and tumbling waters and thence to the depths of the pool, where the fish still flickered in mingled invitation and challenge. Only when the last grape had disappeared did he awaken, staring with a puzzled frown at Eve calmly disposing of her third bunch.

"Strange!" he whispered; "how strange! These grapes are sweeter than the grapes of Paradise!"

"Why not?" she retorted. "I picked them for you. And there are figs too—lovely, luscious figs. You must build me a bower here to-morrow."

"To-morrow?" echoed Adam. "But there is so much to see, so much to find out. I want to go across the stream and over the hill. Who knows what there may be, just over the hill?"

"Oh!" exclaimed Eve, "are you going to leave me here all by myself?"

"You can come too, if you like."

"But I don't like. I want to stay here."

"Stay here? With all the world before us?"

"Well, you were quite content to stay in the Garden, were you not?"

"That's quite different. We are not in the Garden now. We . . ."

Adam paused, suddenly aware of another mystery. He did not want to go back to the Garden. He wanted . . . what *did* he want? To see what was on the other side of the hill, for one thing. Then to go on, and on, until there was nothing left to discover.

"I insist upon staying here," remarked Eve, breaking into his dreams. Adam was about to assert his superior will when he noticed the panther raise a minatory head.

"All right," he murmured sulkily, "have it your own way." And he consoled himself with the unspoken determination to see the other side of the hill before the sun set again.

While the twilight deepened they continued their feast on the sweeter fruits of the earth, and then, in default of a bower, sought rest in a hollow of the grassy bank, where Adam lay half recumbent, with an arm around Eve and her head on his shoulder.

The panther lay at their feet. He, likewise, was well content. In one short day he had instructed the parents of mankind in the technique of matrimonial disputes (a matter of infinite and eternal importance), achieved the dawn of humour (establishing a convention of merriment from which the race has never departed), introduced woman to her role as ministering angel, and

awakened in at least one of the pioneers the love of sport, the spirit of scientific curiosity, the appreciation of beauty in sight and sound, the passion for travel and adventure.

A good day, indeed. Yet there was still more he wanted to do and could do best in the stillness of the night. Adam, he sensed, was not yet asleep. Yearning as he was, in body and mind, for slumber, the lord of creation was beginning to realize that his first night of exile was going to be a sleepless one. Eve's head, at first so light and comforting, was now heavy on his bones; her hair, which had caressed his cheek so deliciously, now tickled and stung, and his arm embracing her ached with fatigue. Somewhere in the recesses of his being, moreover, the cactus spines remaining from the dawn of humour and feminine compassion made their presence felt.

In the darkness the starlight sparkled from sky and pool. But brighter than the queen of planets, and more magnetic in beauty, there shone the eyes of the panther, fixed upon him. Looking into these glowing orbs, which seemed to carry some insistent message for him, Adam ceased to see anything else or to be aware of anything but himself as a creature alive in a wonderful, inexplicable universe. It was as if he had become for the first time conscious of himself and of space, time, life, and destiny. Through the long hours marked by the wheeling of the stars his mind, like a bird trying its wings, went questing from height to height.

During breakfast Adam was silent, oblivious of Eve's chatter as of the equally constant murmur of the waterfall. He hardly noticed her rise and wander among the trees, gathering an armful of tendrils of vine and other creeping plants, but when she returned he roused himself.

"Eve," he declared, "I have been thinking."

"About building my bower?" she queried brightly.

"Tcha!" he retorted. "Your bower, indeed! No,

no; I have been asking myself a thousand and one questions. Why were we ever made? And why all these extraordinary animals I took such trouble to name—the lions, tigers, elephants, camels, stoats, rabbits, spiders, flies, and what not? Even this panther—the only one of the crowd that has taken any notice of us since we were cast out—what's he here for?"

"He has got a lovely coat," remarked Eve; "I wish I had one like it."

"Don't interrupt, especially with nonsense like that. You see, my dear, the whole thing is a hopeless puzzle. All these multitudes of animals in all sorts of sizes and shapes. What for? I can understand the fruits of the earth, since we can eat them; but even so there are hosts of trees with no fruit whatever. What's the use of them? What, for instance, is the use of the cactus?"

Eve, who was now busy plaiting the tendrils, glanced at Adam with a reminiscent smile.

"And take ourselves," he went on. "The Lord made us, and made us in his own image; then he put us in a Garden specially made for our delight. Very well! But why did he put in that garden a tree that we, the lords of creation, must not touch? Did he know that we would be sure to eat of it? Or did he not? One way or the other it seems that the Lord was responsible. Yet he blamed us, and drove us out in disgrace as if we ourselves had created everything and bungled the business. Besides, he let the serpent into the Garden to beguile you. . . ."

Eve stopped in her task and looked up menacingly.

"Tut, tut!" said Adam, "I am not going to start that old row again. You were made out of me just as I was made out of earth, and you are no more to blame than I am. Who, I ask you, made the serpent? Did the Lord make him and then allow him to bring the entire scheme of creation to ruin? If the Lord did not make him, then the Lord is not the Lord of all, and there must be another Lord as great as he is. Do you know," he went on after a pause, "I have been wonder-

ing whether all we were told in the Garden about ourselves is really true."

"Oh, Adam!" cried Eve, "you mustn't. That's wicked!"

"Wicked? Who told you it was wicked to wonder?"

"Nobody told me; I just know it is."

"Well, I don't. Wicked or not, I am going to go on wondering. For, mark you, the most mysterious thing of all is that I never felt really alive until we were thrust out of the Garden. Think of it, Eve! If the Lord's scheme had gone right instead of wrong we should have had nothing to do for ever and ever but sit about in the Garden. Why, we should have been bored to tears. Whereas now . . ." He looked across the stream to the beckoning hill. "Whereas now I feel myself really the lord of creation, or, if not already the lord, able to make myself so when I have learned about the unknown wonders that lie on the other side of the hill."

"Very well, my lord!" Eve rose, gathered up the plaited tendrils and wound them gracefully over her body. "There!" she cried, "what do you think about that? Don't you consider it a great improvement on the old-fashioned fig-leaf?"

Adam, confronted with an even more subtle problem than those which had occupied the hours of night, stared at the spectacle in wonder mixed with fear. The sweep of green and russet leaves over white skin touched fresh chords of emotion. For a moment his gaze turned towards the hill as if to seek escape, then settled upon the eyes of his helpmeet. Her eyes, he reflected, had a glow in them that reminded him of the panther—a warmer glow, perhaps, but none the less impelling.

"I think," he whispered, "that before I set off over the hill I shall build you a bower."

With the building of the bower the panther departed. Resuming his original form and winging his way over the deserted Garden, where the Cherubim were still occupied in their work of supererogation, he assured

himself that never in all eternity had twenty-four hours been better spent. He had stolen them from the preparations for a revolt of the angels—an important affair, no doubt, but a trifling skirmish compared with the revolt of man.

VI

THE TEMPTATION OF PROFESSOR TODD

BRIAN entered the Professor's study in the exalted mood of a lover approaching a mistress long worshipped from afar. Here he was at last in the presence of the man whose photograph had been his *ikon* for so many years—a photograph which showed a comfortable figure seated at a writing-desk which bore nothing but the elementary implements of penmanship. The Professor's enemies were pleased to discover in this setting a subtle suggestion that the Todd series of philosophical works had been produced, not from the reconstitution of the dehydrated contents of the world's libraries, but by the spontaneous cerebration of a native omniscience. They also alleged that the Professor, with his solid countenance, his short beard, and his loose tweeds, was essentially a yeoman farmer.

None of these impudent heresies disturbed Brian in the supreme moment of meeting his Gamaliel. The only element not exactly as he had pictured it was the twinkle in the Professor's eye. What did the old man find humorous in a situation which to the young man was so thrillingly solemn?

"Mr. Brian Charles, I presume?" said the Professor as he shook hands and indicated a chair. "Do you know that you are the most persistent person I have ever encountered? All my life I have been besieged by importunate inquirers who, if I had submitted to them, would have transformed me into an information bureau on matters covered by elementary school books. I imagined my defences impregnable, but you contrived to penetrate them. What are you in civil life—an advertisement canvasser, an insurance agent, a super-salesman, or an Empire-builder?"

"I am an accountant," said Brian, diffidently.

"Ah! A sad occupation, bound and gagged with all

sorts of conventions. Don't you sometimes wish that you could handle figures with the spiritual freedom a theologian applies to his dogmas, making two and two add up to $4 \pm x$ as your heart dictates? How much more fascination there would be in your work if figures enjoyed the divine gift of free will possessed, according to our obscurantists, by electrons and human beings! Most of the discontent felt regarding the financial world is surely due to its adherence to a rigid determinism, coupled with its persecution of anybody who attempts to bring a touch of idealism to mould it nearer to the heart's desire."

Brian's gaze wavered. Was it possible that the Professor—his Professor—was pulling his leg? Something must be done, and done quickly, to raise the interview to its proper level, but before he could speak the opening words, rehearsed so often, the Professor's manner changed.

"After that irrelevant prologue," he said briskly, "let us get to business. What do you want me to do?"

"Having read all your books . . ."

"A feat," interjected the Professor, "performed by only two other men—myself and the printer's reader."

"Indeed, I have read them all twice at least. And the more I have read in their pages the more convinced have I become that you are the one man who can do what the world most needs doing at the present day."

"Good God!" murmured the Professor.

"I mean it quite seriously," pursued Brian. "You will admit, I think . . ."

"One moment," the Professor interposed. "I always object to that apparently innocent gambit, which is so well designed to lead people up the garden. Even professors can be led up gardens. You would be surprised if you knew how many of them have followed me there."

"On the contrary," replied Brian, "I should estimate, from my experience to-day, that few of them escaped. But what's in my mind is not a logical trap; it is a mere

statement of fact: that the religious situation in the modern world is chaotic."

"My dear boy, it always was and always will be, world without end."

"Well, let me put it that the chaos to-day is worse confounded because, with the increased closeness and complexity of international relations throughout the world, the confusion and strife arising from irreconcilable superstitions are more deplorable than at any previous stage in history."

"Spoken like a book. Perhaps you are right. At any rate I'll grant you that in a religious sense the world is, symbolically speaking, in a hell of a mess. Am I to play the part of Hercules?"

"Precisely. You see, Professor, you have forged the very instrument for the cleansing process. Hitherto the story of religion has been merely a succession of superstitions. Each new religion has offered a fresh form of irrationalism, and is, in spite of all its outward differences, essentially the mixture as before. On the other hand, anyone who sets out nowadays to construct a credible faith has at his command a mass of detailed knowledge about the universe and man denied to all the earlier founders of religion. It has been your function, Professor, to present that fundamental information, in all its main aspects, comprehensively and in clear order. There is hardly any important field of investigation that you have not covered, expounding the latest results and presenting them in relation to the universal pattern. Your encyclopædic range and your gift of synthesis are, Professor, the miracle of the age."

"My critics," observed the Professor drily, "declare that I employ cohorts of collaborators and that, far from being a philosopher or even a man of science, I am the organizer of a fact factory on mass-production lines."

"I don't know how it has been done," responded Brian, "and for the moment I don't care; what concerns me is that you have provided us with the essence, in an assimilable form, of all that man has yet dis-

covered about himself and the world he lives in. The effect upon religion of this panorama of learning is largely negative. Perfect knowledge casteth out superstition, and I cannot conceive how any intelligent person can read your works and retain a vestige of the errors and ignorances that are the very texture of established religions. But is the death of superstition enough?"

"I suppose not, if superstition dies in the sure and certain hope of an inglorious resurrection."

"Which it generally does, I am afraid. At any rate, when superstition dies it leaves a sense of loss. The mind craves for something to take the place of what has been lost. So I have come to ask you to put the coping-stone on your life's work by giving us something definitely constructive—a new religion in place of all the old."

"Something definitely constructive!" echoed the Professor. "You chill me, Mr. Charles. For fifty years I have been building, building, building. And now you ask me for something definitely constructive!"

"Oh, I admit," responded Brian quickly, "that your work has been almost wholly positive in content and purpose, but in relation to religion it leaves the ordinary man in a vacuum."

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed the Professor. "I relieve the ordinary man of the mental junk and emotional flapdoodle inherited from the ages of ignorance, and give him in exchange the entire known universe. Yet you tell me he remains empty. As our gallant American allies say: 'How come?'"

"Simply that he lacks an interpretation of the universe in terms of himself. Religion gave him that—an irrational interpretation, no doubt, but still an interpretation with a personal, inspiring, sustaining significance. Having taken that from him, you must give him a rational interpretation to meet his need."

"A creed for a creed, in fact?"

"Precisely. And who better equipped than yourself to frame such a creed—a creed in perfect harmony with

objective knowledge, a creed capable of sustaining the most corrosive criticism, a creed so convincing and so dynamic that it will energize and control every thought and action?"

The Professor contemplated the young man for a space; the twinkle, though subdued and a trifle wistful, was still discernible in his eye.

"Assuming a rational creed to be duly drawn up and promulgated," he said, "do you really think it will fill the place of the old ones, with their stupendous and consoling assertions about God's providence and immortality, their mysteries, their sacraments, their ceremonies—all the pomp and circumstance of glorious ecclesiasticism?"

"Assuredly. It's what the world is waiting for."

"Very well, then. Let us start from there. At your request, backed by the whole world, I set out to found the one and only true religion of Toddism, by formulating my creed. What happens next? Does the waiting world adopt it right away?"

"It will be accepted by the more intelligent people first of all, and will spread from them to the others."

"A tempting vision, which offers me the intellectual kingdoms of the earth! Alas, it would be an essential item of my creed that people should not accept it, but should treat it with infinite scepticism, subjecting every statement to destructive analysis, and curbing, like the very devil, their enthusiasm for the omniscient Professor Todd. To do this critical work efficiently they would need a vast equipment of knowledge and a long training in the rigours of scientific thought; otherwise their acceptances or rejections, their amendments or reservations, would be of no value, at least in the eyes of the pious founder. Tell me, Mr. Charles—you who see the world clearly through the bright eyes of youth—what proportion of men and women have the capacity to take the first step towards becoming my disciples?"

"A larger proportion than your modesty seems inclined to realize, Professor. I am convinced that the numbers of worthwhile people rallying to your standard

would be sufficient to start a great, an overwhelming movement."

The Professor sighed. "But I have just told you that 'rallying' in that spirit is the very negation of Toddism. I have not the slightest doubt that if I gave my mind to it, and had a few ardent souls like yourself as missionaries, I could put Toddism across as triumphantly as if it were a patent medicine. In which case Toddism would be born dead. However, let me grant you the possibility of a sound beginning, achieved by a group of apostles prepared, after an adequate mind-searching, to preach Toddism pure and undefiled, what guarantee can you give me that the faith would continue in its virgin perfection? How is my rational religion to escape the schisms and heresies that have been the fate of all its predecessors?"

"Simply because of its rational quality. It is dogmatism that inevitably breeds schism and heresy."

"Dogmatism alone? Why, if my apostles are to be worth their salt, each one of them will be bound to find something in the Toddist articles that he wants to alter or omit or flatly deny. He may suppress his heresy out of politeness to me, or I may suppress it by excommunicating him as an impure Toddian, thus again flouting the fundamental principle of my own creed. But after I am dead and the customary scramble for the mantel of Elijah takes place, no power on earth will arrest the process of fission. I can picture the faithful quarrelling, just like any Church Council of old, though perhaps without mutual slaughter, over some issue like indeterminacy in nature, and so presenting your world, eager for the unifying blessing of a rational religion, with the alternative of Determinist Toddism and Indeterminist Toddism. And apart from doctrine, which spontaneously generates differences of opinion even when it claims to be rational, you must bear in mind that people expect religion to be embodied in some sort of communal organization, with some sort of social activities—meetings, celebrations, ritual observances, and what not. These things interest the

founder of Toddism not at all, but they would be regarded as immensely important by many of his followers; and what a fertile source of division and dispute would they not be! ”

“ I feel,” said Brian, “ that your prognosis is far too pessimistic. Why should a rational religion repeat the life-history of every irrational religion? ”

“ For a very simple and cogent reason. Every creed, you see, is a crystallization of thought, and to crystallize thought is to arrest the process of thought at a particular stage. Toddism as I might have defined it when I was forty would be different from Toddism to-day; each definition would be a ‘ still ’ from a complex cinematograph film—an attempt to represent in static form something that is essentially dynamic. So, in effect, a creed is dead the day after it is born.”

“ Surely not if it expresses fundamental principles of permanent validity and value? ”

“ Like Newton’s first principles before Einstein came along? The only thing eternal about truth is the search for it; the expression of it must bear the marks of time and place. I have no doubt that by the exercise of subtle caution I could produce a series of propositions that looked good for a thousand years, but I am certain that the Toddists of to-morrow, even though they accepted the propositions, would interpret them afresh in the light of their own mental environment. Isn’t it the case that every religion is based on the illusion that certain articles of faith are immortal? And is not every religion cursed with the burden of mummified articles which they try to make look alive by reinterpreting them according to current knowledge? What began as revelation ends as tradition, and the faithful who cling to the tradition justify their actions by pretending that the wisdom of old—that is to say, of the ages of ignorance and superstition—has a divine quality denied to more enlightened times.”

“ Nevertheless,” continued the Professor, after a pause during which Brian searched for a fresh line of attack, “ I confess that I should be tempted to have a

shot at it if I thought that people in general wanted a rational religion. I could at least, without formulating a comprehensive creed, prepare a broad specification for a religion of that sort. But who wants a rational religion, or would embrace it were it offered him? Only the rare reader of the erudite works of a Professor Todd; and he is, by that same token, capable of making one of his own. The rest of the world wants a religion that comforts, protects, consoles, and ministers to the inherent love of mystery, marvel, and illusion. In our conceit, Mr. Charles, we tend to forget that the species to which we belong has only just begun to evolve towards the stage of *Homo sapiens*. Reason has been the last faculty to be acquired, and it is still at the mercy of emotional urges with the momentum of millions of years behind them. Consider the swift and colossal triumph of Christian Science, that illiterate farrago of imbecility, and you have a measure of the qualities which mean success to any new religion and survival to the old ones."

"All the more need, surely, for propagating a rational religion?"

"The need I admit, but I don't admit that offering a cut-and-dried new religion labelled 'rational' is the best way of meeting the need."

"I still don't see how you can meet the need until you make that offer."

"Very well, then, let me cease being an irascible old obstructionist and give you a positive programme. It is the programme I have been following all my life, and I am a trifle depressed at the thought that so ardent a disciple as yourself considers it inadequate. I have endeavoured first of all to convey knowledge in a systematic form, so that the reader can reach a clear synthesis of what is known about his own nature and about the world he lives in. Most irrationalists lack that knowledge; their ignorance of the elementary facts of existence is appalling, and the more knowledge they acquire the less irrational—let us hope—their outlook tends to become. And in the category of knowledge I

include critical studies of the religions that are the seeds and fertilizers of irrationalism. Perhaps you, in common with so many others, regard such critical studies as purely destructive; but is their function not to reveal religions as they really are, to construct a true estimate of their contents and meaning in place of a false? But knowledge, I grant you, is not enough. No less important, to say the least, is the method of acquiring and using it. Here you come to the very root of the difference between us and the people we seek to convert. I have always pressed, and shall continue to press while I have breath in my body, for the supreme importance of the scientific process of thought—the rigorous testing of every fact, every inference, every generalization by objective standards valid for everybody. To understand the scientific method is not difficult, though plenty of men of science tend to think unscientifically, especially outside their particular fields, and are merely puzzled if I talk about the methodology of science. To pursue the scientific method, on the other hand, is the most difficult thing in the world, calling for a mental and emotional discipline of the most arduous kind. The real task before us, as I see it, is to train the new generation in scientific habits of thought; the older generation is largely hopeless, being set for life in unscientific habits and being incapable of understanding the difference between studying science and learning to study scientifically. Nevertheless we must do what we can with the old as well as the young.

“There,” added the Professor, as he smilingly observed the stubborn scepticism of Brian’s expression, “there you have the fundamental principles of my religion: to learn well and to think correctly. These are infinite and eternal principles, and necessary to the salvation of man. They are not a creed which divides and decays, but the twofold path for everyman to a living creed. And they suffice as the basis of an intellectual fellowship among the disciples of truth at all costs. To mark my devotion to that cause, and my hope that you will be one of my disciples, I propose a

little ceremony which is common to many religions and is sanctified by an ancient and enduring tradition. In short, Mr. Charles, talking—even for a Professor who loves it almost as much as does Dr. Joad—is dry work. And what, by the body of Bacchus, must it be for his listener? ”

VII

THE UNKNOWN GOD

JOHNNY CHEFFINS was known among the gay brethren of Fleet Street as the Flying Squad. Even when his assignment was for something as dry, in more than one sense of the word, as an ecclesiastical conference, he took off with the soaring verve of a Spitfire. The adventure that ended his earthly career was the result of his characteristic *élan* when setting out to interview a newly-appointed Bishop who was of no news value whatever, since his orthodoxy remained immaculate and no hint of hypertrophy was visible on the left section of his angelic accessories.

The ingredients of the catastrophe were simple: a fat man barging behind his umbrella across the rain-swept street, a skidding taxicab, a six-wheeled wagon, and Johnny with an excess of momentum. So there, an instant after, he was a crumpled heap on the mud, and his astral—or, more strictly speaking, his professional—being hovered over the scene and watched the subsequent proceedings which in theory should have interested him no more. He observed the policeman take charge, give him the once-over, and call an ambulance; he continued to be an interested spectator of the hospital procedure which culminated in the arrival of his wife Dorothy at his bedside. Poor girl! Scared and bewildered, she sat gazing at the unconscious form, thankful that Johnny was well insured, and speculating on the future of a not bad-looking young widow with only one child. He was telepathically aware also of the reactions of his colleagues; most of them gave him at least a passing thought, and some of them wished him post-mortem luck in another round. None of them, however, put in for his job. There was a melancholy lack of enthusiasm for the clerical assemblies and convocations among which Johnny had lived and

moved and had his appropriate being, since he was the son of an Archdeacon and familiar from the cradle with chasubles and aumbries and auricular confession and the importance of Easter offerings.

After the funeral, at which Johnny was indubitably the chief mourner—and, having listened to the burial service critically for the first time, decided that it ought to be rewritten—he felt himself free for the great assignment. Being a journalist he had no illusions about his proper destiny, and when he began apparently to ascend instead of descend he modestly recollected that in going down a mine-shaft at high speed he had received the same illusory impression. Nevertheless, when he finally came to rest he was confronted with the veritable Golden Gates, standing hospitably open and flanked by a reception office in which sat a veritable St. Peter, looking precisely like his portrait in the stained-glass window of the Cathedral, except that his beard was a little more luxuriant.

Johnny bowed in silence—in silence, not because he was awe-struck, but merely because he realized that his pious education, profuse as it had been, had not included the proper mode of addressing a saint. Was it Your Reverence, or Your Holiness, or Your Sanctity?

St. Peter asked him his name and struck a gong which rang out like Big Ben. A covey of cherubim appeared, received the order “Cheffins, Johnny,” swept out, and came back again almost instantly with a large scroll which they unfolded before the Saint. Johnny was making a mental note about the admirable staff work when he became aware that St. Peter was observing him with a curious expression.

“A journalist?” said the Saint.

“I presume,” said Johnny politely, “that the appearance of newspaper men in this region is a rare event.”

“Not altogether so,” observed the Saint. “Newspaper proprietors come here as a matter of course. In addition to being munificent benefactors they are pillars of orthodoxy, buttresses of the established order, up-

holders of all the sacred conventions. But journalists . . . ” He paused to glance again at the scroll. “Ah! I perceive that, in contrast to your fellows, you have consistently breathed a religious atmosphere. So you have earned your reward.”

“Indeed, I hope so,” murmured Johnny. “But what, may I inquire, *is* my reward? I mean to say, what does one do here . . . for ever and ever?”

“Amen,” sang the cherubim, whose expression of bland but quite deceptive innocence reminded Johnny of his choir-boy days.

St. Peter looked slightly pained. “These questions,” he remarked, “are rather unusual. Most of our guests are only too thankful to be here instead of in . . . h’m . . . Another Place; they are content to wait and see, having all eternity to wait in and all infinity to contemplate. I fear that, in spite of your redeeming theological environment, you have been subtly influenced by the so-called scientific spirit, which is irreverent enough to put a question-mark to anything, however august and sanctified.”

“Possibly,” agreed Johnny, “but there is no danger of that here.”

“No, of course not. Nevertheless, we have a few representatives of science in our midst. Mostly physicists, however. For some reason biologists, geologists, biochemists, and so on, have found themselves elsewhere. The physicists have indeed won their reward for signal services. Moving as they do, and as we all do when we so desire, with the speed of light, they take off gleefully to confirm their theories about the curvature of space and what not, and when one of them thinks he has discovered something that confounds the others he shoots away in pursuit of them. Umpteen light-years hence you will find them busy in this enthralling chase, world without end.”

He paused to stifle, with a frown, the Amen ready on the lips of the cherubim.

“I am afraid,” interjected Johnny, “that that sort of pursuit would not enthrall me. What I should like to

do is to produce a newspaper—the perfect newspaper—with myself as proprietor, editor, staff, printer, distributor, and all the rest of the caboodle. I could write up all the new arrivals and put them in touch with the old folk they want to meet. For example, when Joad bursts upon us, all heaven ought to hear about it, and he himself will want to meet Socrates, if only to settle which of them is the greater philosopher. The possibilities are colossal, stupendous. . . .”

“Infinite and eternal are the appropriate words,” remarked St. Peter. “Well, Heaven being the vision of fulfilled desire, you may proceed.”

“Thanks awfully. I shall now have a chance of settling a question that has worried me for years. I want to get hold of the man who built the altar in Athens to the Unknown God.”

St. Peter started as if a cock had suddenly crowed. Even the cherubim looked like choir boys when the soloist hits the top note a semitone low.

“You know,” pursued Johnny, “the one referred to by St. Paul in Acts xvii, 23—a passage with which you are doubtless familiar. St. Paul—a great journalist, by the way, a great journalist—spotted it just before one of his open-air meetings and used it as a text for a sermon which was, I suppose, as clear as mud to his audience, but which has given Bible commentators a host of headaches ever since. I have read all the commentaries; I know by heart all they say about Pausanias and Theophrastus and Diogenes Laertius and the veil of Isis, but I am no nearer to the truth than Jerome himself. Why is it that commentators never get beyond juggling with contradictory probabilities? Anyway, now’s my chance to confound them all by getting a red-hot story out of the builder himself.”

“Why not,” asked St. Peter heavily, “why not consult St. Paul?”

Johnny considered the suggestion for a moment. “As I remarked, St. Paul was a great journalist. I should like a special interview with him on a lot of things; but not this, since he merely saw the altar as a

tourist might. The man I need is the man who drafted the inscription."

How many light-years Johnny had to wait for a response to the S.O.S. he radiated with every edition of his perfect newspaper he did not trouble to calculate. The time passed pleasantly enough, although there were periods when he suspected that more interesting material might be garnered at another port of entry. He made the most of the quainter figures which appeared, all too rarely, in the stream (or trickle) of newcomers. Chief among them was a Fundamentalist from Dayton, Tennessee, who looked forward to a personally conducted tour of Hell and called upon St. Peter to make it snappy. After a long argument, conducted with apostolic fervour, he consented to a compromise whereby he would join Dr. Isaac Watts, Jeremy Taylor, Father Furness, Calvin, John Knox, and other kindred souls on one of the hotter stars. Memorable, too, was the scene when a Cardinal arrived and intimated that he would complain to a higher authority about the unconscionable delay over the examination of his scroll; he was heard to declare that in similar circumstances the Pope himself would be entitled to protest. The simultaneous appearance of two experts in Biblical exegesis provided another bright interlude. They came in earnest dispute over a passage in Habakkuk, took no notice of the formal proceedings for admission, and departed to continue the discussion for all time, each assuring the other that the authorities upon which he relied were ignoramuses, that his so-called certainties were mere probabilities, and his so-called probabilities the wildest conjectures. A touch of pathos was afforded by a modest Unitarian, who, having been so often reminded on earth by his Trinitarian brethren that he was no Christian, was as surprised as Johnny himself had been to find the gates open. His astonishment was as great as—though of a different quality from—that of the vicar who discovered that what he had been preaching to empty pews in Little

Twittering for fifty years was after all apparently quite true. "If I had only known!" he murmured, and the clerical smile bestowed upon the cherubim had more than a touch of wistfulness.

When a young Greek suddenly appeared before him, Johnny exclaimed: "Ah! In response to my advertisement . . ." Then an important question—one which he had intended to take up with St. Peter on arrival—occurred to him. Were the whiskies and sodas mentioned by Raymond to Sir Oliver Lodge real or ethereal? After all, his visitor had travelled at 186,000-odd miles per second from somewhere behind the Giant Nebula, and a drop of something seemed indicated. What, he wondered, would be the attitude of an ancient Greek to a twentieth-century double? Unsympathetic he was afraid, since these old fellows quaffed the grape at large out of flagons, or amphoræ, or buckets of some sort. And this hefty specimen before him, with his sun-browned limbs and his merry eye, looked as if he could quaff it fifty-fifty with Bacchus himself.

"It was good of you to call in . . .," began Johnny. "Such a long journey, I am afraid."

"Not at all. Any excuse for travel—or none at all, for that matter—is good enough for me. On earth, you must understand, I was master of a ship. We sailed all the known seas—aye, and beyond them. Some day you must hear my *Odyssey*."

"Delighted! Some day. But the first item on the agenda is that mysterious altar in Athens."

"Which was in no way mysterious. Its genesis, I assure you, was supremely simple and logical. In my travels I encountered not only all sorts of men and women, but all the great multitude of gods—sun-gods, moon-gods; gods of fire and rain and thunder; corn-gods and wine-gods; gods in the shape of bulls and rams and fish; odd little gods that dwelt in valleys and hills and rocks and trees. Gods everywhere—or, perhaps, nowhere? I had, of course, my own gods: gods of wind and sea, gods that shone in the brighter

stars that guided my course. To them I prayed and offered sacrifices as did other men; to them likewise I hurled curses when disaster overtook me. But in my soul I wondered which among the divine swarm was the greatest god; which, if any, was a true god? I saw death and pestilence and famine come to all men alike—to those who sacrificed and to those who scoffed. Good fortune and ill; fair winds and foul—who could say whence or why? At last, one day on the Areopagus, I saw sheep turned loose to mark, by the spots where they happened to rest, the altars at which men ought to offer sacrifices in thanksgiving or in hope of appeasement. And as I watched this august ceremony, performed by men as solemn as, as absorbed as, but far more stupid than, the sheep, I laughed, and with laughter came illumination.”

“The laughter I fully understand,” said Johnny; “not so the illumination.”

“Illumination would have come to you likewise if you had stood beside me and looked with eyes which had seen all the lands and people I had seen. It was at myself, as a man among men, that I laughed, and in laughing learned that what they lacked was the capacity to do likewise. I saw the colossal pageant of gods, priests, soothsayers, augurs, and bewildered worshippers as a comedy in which the most hilarious characters were precisely those who were most gravely convinced of their unique wisdom and their exalted magnificence. All the gods, great and small, terrible and kindly, about whom men wrangled and in whose name they slew each other, were the creation of men who had never looked at themselves and been amused by the spectacle. What was wrong with the gods, and with the men who created them, was that none of them ever laughed. True, one had heard of laughter on Olympus, but it was never more than a derisive roar at somebody else’s discomfiture; never was it the truly divine laughter which is but a ripple on a smile and is most divine when awakened by the observation of oneself strutting across the stage of the world. What a dread martyrdom of

bloodshed, tyranny, fear, and folly would man have been spared if priests and prophets had been gifted with a twinkle; if, instead of posing as the god-sent ministers of life and death over men and inflating their sombre vanity with endless posturings and penances, they had devoted a few moments now and then to the cathartic process of reducing themselves to their true proportions."

"Having attended numerous ecclesiastical conferences and ceremonies," said Johnny, "I cordially agree. All the same. . . ."

"So," proceeded the visitor, "I pondered upon a mystery deeper than the esoteric mysteries of Greek or Roman or Christian. How had man come by this salutary gift, so neglected by philosophers, so despised by priests, so dreaded by the usurpers of power? Not one of the innumerable gods or goddesses known to the faithful of any land appeared even to possess it or even a glimmer of its meaning and its beneficence. Yet clearly it was the supreme gift from the gods for the comfort and entertainment and enlightenment of the soul of suffering man, and, as there was no known god to whom I could render thanks, I built my altar to the Unknown God. To-day I should insert the words 'and Not Ungrateful' after 'Unknown.' Rich has been the reward for my pious act in honour of this gay and previously neglected divinity. While on earth I was diverted by the stupefaction of the simple as they stared at my altar, and still more by the grave pretence of the learned that they held the solution of the riddle. The sport will go on for all eternity, since the reverend scholars, amid their mutual contentions, are at one in a conviction that the altar to which St. Paul gave such unexpected publicity must signify something esoteric, something so profound, so pompous, and so obscure, that only an intelligence of exceptional penetration could discover it. For my amusement I have waylaid some of these long-bearded and atrabilious pedants and told them the truth of the matter. Their expressions of disgust and horror remain an everlasting

delight. Any fantastic or far-fetched solution would have been infinitely better than the suggestion that the whole affair was a joke. Confronted with a dead mouse, the last thing suspected is the existence of a cat."

"Alas, yes!" said Johnny. "Were I to publish your story in my newspaper and give it my editorial blessing I should probably be sent back to Fleet Street as an undesirable alien. Were I to transmit it to my old chief, through the Psychical Research people, he would merely lose what faith he has in spirit messages. One might be more fortunate, however, in the region which I have learned to describe as Another Place. What do you think?"

"I think the adventure is worth making, partly, because any adventure appeals to me, and partly because I have long suspected that in the region you so delicately indicate I should find many estimable beings who, without being aware of the fact, have laid their gifts upon my altar. Let us then, as fellow worshippers of the God of Gods who bestowed on mankind the miraculous virtue of a sense of humour, try our luck among the genial hosts of sinners."

